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October/November 1997

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Cover Design by Monica Gaige-Rosensweig

Cover illustration by Gary L. Freeman

Stories from Asimov's have won twenty-six Hugos and twenty-three Nebula Awards, and our editors have received eleven Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1996 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Published monthly except for a combined October/November double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$33.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$41.97 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 1997 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. USPS 533-310, ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

SHIPS THAT SAIL TO MARS (Part Two)

I wrote last time about the revelation by NASA in the summer of 1996 that a meteorite discovered in Antarctica that was thought to have fallen to Earth from Mars had been found to contain apparent traces of ancient and primitive Martian life-forms. Exciting if true, yes; but a good many scientists found themselves reacting skeptically to the NASA announcement.

One of those with doubts about the find was Dr. Jack D. Farmer, a geologist and paleobiologist at the Ames Research Center in California. Though he noted that the meteorite offered the first significant evidence that there had been water—a prerequisite for life of the sort we understand—on Mars in ancient times, the rock itself did not provide definite proof that life had been there. "It's interesting but not convincing," he said. And, like many of the other scientists who commented on the meteorite find, he said, "It gives us a lot of compelling reasons to go back to Mars."

Yes. The only way to be certain that the Antarctic meteorite really did come from Mars is to send an expedition there to collect some rock samples with which it can be compared. But what are we doing about accomplishing that?

A little. But not a great deal, it seems.

In 1989 President Bush announced a program aimed at landing astronauts on Mars by the year 2019. But the Bush administration is history; the \$400 billion that the manned expedition to Mars would have cost is hard to find in Washington these days; and in the summer of 1996 President Clinton scrapped the entire plan. Unmanned probes, Clinton said, would do the job just as well, for a very much smaller cost.

And indeed robot probes are on their way to Mars right now, with a long series of others scheduled to follow in the next few years. They'll be carrying small roving vehicles that will collect and examine mineralogical specimens from various points on the surface of Mars—but they won't be bringing them back to Earth. Like the Viking landers of 1976, these rovers will merely be doing on-site testing of the chemical makeup of the rocks.

For these unmanned missions to bring actual mineral samples home for careful study in terrestrial laboratories would be a far more complicated—and expensive—proposition. A group of NASA researchers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena does indeed have a plan for such a mis-

sion by 2003, but the likelihood of its winning government approval is slim, even though the JPL scheme has been stripped to a bare minimum to meet the economic realities of our current space program.

There are various plans, some involving a single vehicle that would send a probe down to gather rocks while waiting in Mars orbit for it to return, and others that involve sending two vehicles to Mars: a cheap, lightweight rover to collect rock samples, and a recovery vessel to bring them home. The rover, after gathering its rocks, would lift off from Mars and rendezvous with the recovery ship in orbit above it, depositing its samples and falling back to Mars as the recovery ship sets out for Earth.

The problem with both of these plans, and other similar ones, is that so little money is available for carrying them out that the ships themselves would be flimsy little things barely capable of bringing home more than a pound of Martian rock: a skimpy sample indeed with which to do the necessary research. And having the whole thing carried out by robots forfeits the exercise of informed human judgment in selecting the samples that the presence of actual astronauts could provide.

Still, it's better than nothing, and nothing is likely to be what we'll get if we stubbornly hold out for a manned flight as the only useful way to explore Mars in the near future. (On the same day in

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1996 when President Clinton announced the cancellation of the Bush plan for a manned expedition, the Federal Aviation Agency issued a license for what it called the world's first private space launch facility, a 106-acre site at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California to be called the California Spaceport. It'll be used for the launching of commercial space ventures, including some for scientific research. I like to think that private enterprise is the ultimate answer to the challenge of financing the exploration of space; but that's a discussion for some other time.)

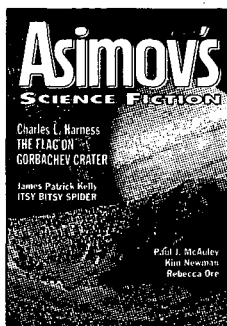
As it happens, I stumbled the other day upon an alternative proposal for getting to Mars and checking the place out, and I offer it herewith.

I found it in a rare and highly desirable book called *The Ship That Sailed to Mars*, by William M. Timlin, which I've long wanted to own and which I finally found at a San Francisco book fair. I don't know who William M. Timlin was, and I haven't been able to find out anything about him; but he was plainly a gifted illustrator and a man with some degree of poetic gift as well. The book is a glorious quarto bound in half vellum, with forty-nine full-color plates tipped in by hand, and a text done in elegant hand lettering. It was published in 1923 in England by Harlap in an edition of just two thousand copies, of which two hundred, including mine, were issued the following year in the United

States by the firm of Frederick A. Stokes. The American edition originally sold for \$12, which was more than a week's pay for most Americans in 1924. It sells for rather more than that today—I've seen copies quoted at \$1500 and more, though I didn't have to pay quite that much for mine. I understand that a modern reprint edition exists, although that seems to be getting hard to find also.

Despite its title, *The Ship That Sailed to Mars* is pure fantasy, not even remotely science fiction. Its protagonist is an old man who had said, "in his dim, forgotten youth, 'I will go to Mars; sailing by way of the Moon, and the more friendly planets.'" Scientists and astronomers greeted his announcement with scorn, crying out, "Have we not ever taught you that Mars is thirty thousand thousand miles away, and nothing could ever live on a journey there?" Then he asked them quickly, "Could a fairy go?" And they left him, muttering in their beards as they went, for they had no faith, nor any belief, in fairies."

But the Old Man does. He recruits a staff of fairies who help him construct the ship he has designed—not a tin spaceship of the dreary Wernher von Braun kind, but a lovely airy wooden galleon with great bellying sails and pennants to flap in the breeze. "With its sheen of ivory and gold, and lustre of emerald and sapphire, its peacock hangings and rose silk ropes, the Ship was nearly as beautiful as a sunset." And off they



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go one evening, the Old Man and his fairy crew, to Mars.

Of course there are problems en route, which Timlin vividly depicts in his marvelous fanciful watercolors and sly elliptical text. Monsters lurk in space, and roar and glower at the ship as it floats past them, light as a soap bubble. They pass the Sorrowful Planet, "a land of vile ooze, pitted in incredible ways, and crawling with livid horrors," and sidestep a meteor that leaps at them "with a baleful glare and a demoniacal roaring," and elude a huge space-dwelling serpent that is none other than the one that tempted Eve. Then come lovelier spheres, where the Argonauts who sought the Golden Fleece reside, and oth-

er heroes of classical myth, and at last Mars is in view before them. They float down through a purple twilight to the shining city that is their goal.

The city is "ablaze with lights of welcome, and fairy bridges across the Great Canal were as shimmering half-hoops of jewels; boats and wonderful barges moved in slow procession along the water-ways. At a courteous summons, the Old Man and his Fairies descended and entered the Royal Barge—a gemmed, beflowered dream—and were seated near the King." The Old Man confers with the King of Mars, and meets his beautiful daughter, and is shown all the opulence and wonder of Mars, its strange plants and precious gems

and rare metals, and eventually is taken to the Zoo, in whose woods roam "harmless but inexpressibly Hideous Things."

And so the magical account goes on, through many an adventure that I will withhold from you here, though suffice it to say that the Old Man in his tour of Mars withstands the dread monsters that live beyond the idyllic capital, and does away with the bleakness that has afflicted the Thunder City, the one place on Mars that is not a place of joyful idyll, and eventually sees the Princess and her destined Prince united in marriage before the story comes to its close.

There is no trace here of the Mars of Kim Stanley Robinson or Greg Bear or Ben Bova, to name just three of the science fiction writers who have worked so diligently and well in recent years to make the red planet seem real to us. Nor is it the Mars of NASA's budget-constrained scientists. It is all very delicate and beautiful, as charming as any tale of Oz, and as romantic and captivating as the fantastic visions of Mars served up by Edgar Rice Burroughs and, later, Leigh Brackett.

The situation looks pretty bad for a manned voyage to the real Mars in my lifetime and very prob-

ably in yours. It doesn't even look so good, right now, for bare-bones probes that will scoop up a few ounces of Martian pebbles and somehow get them back to us so that chemists and geologists can work them over in the mysterious laboratories of the Johnson Space Center in Houston. So I propose that we give up this futile business of trying to design orbiters and landers and robot probes and all of that, and put our faith in the Realm of Faery.

Let us, like William M. Timlin's irrepressible Old Man, round up a team of fairy shipwrights and fairy navigators and fairy deckhands, and let us build ourselves a fairy galleon with full-bellied sails, and let us float away from Earth, one summer night, and go out beyond the Sorrowful Planet and the zone of Meteors and the Star of Classic Myths, on and on through the strangeness of space until we arrive at the shining city of myriad-pinnacled towers and airy bridges over gleaming lagoons and canals that is the capital of Mars, where we will live happily ever after, peering out by night toward the mysterious blue sphere of our former world of Earth and wondering, not in any very serious way, what's going on down there.

I'm all for it. Are you? ●

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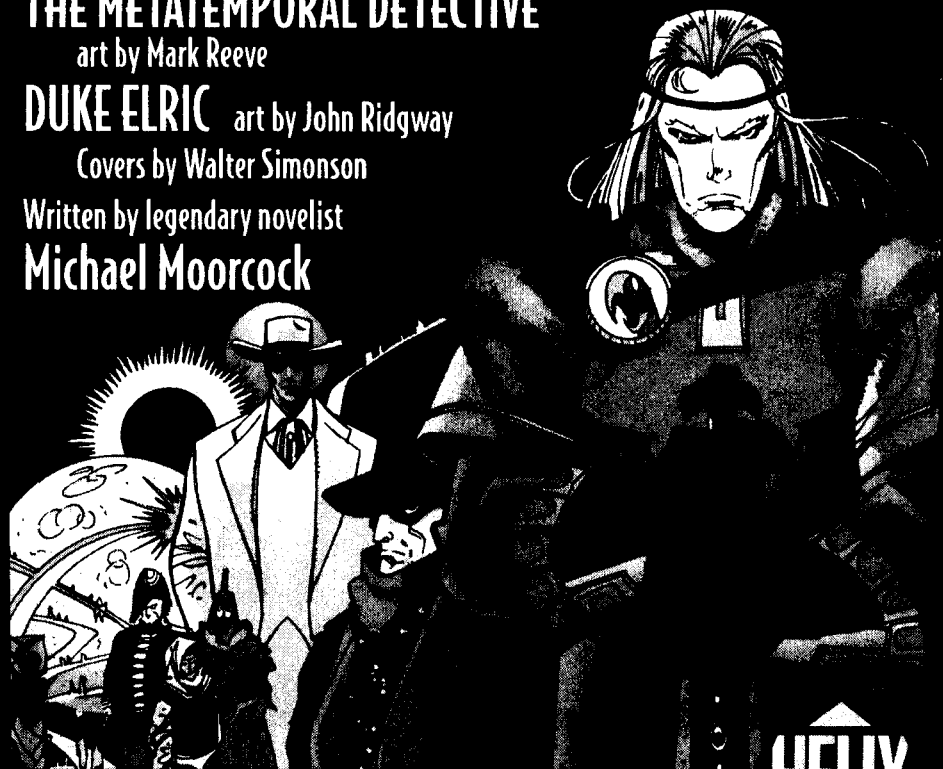
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LETTERS

Dear Gardner,

I've been an on-and-off subscriber for the last ten years, and have always enjoyed the material in *Asimov's*, which I invariably read cover-to-cover, whether it's stories, poems, reviews, or controversy.

I had to comment on Stephen Baxter's "Zemlya" (January 1997), which touched me greatly. I grew up on the Eagle's side of the space race, as did many of us, and I adopted the bias that came from that upbringing. As my knowledge for the history of human flight and spaceflight grew, I came to see the Bear's point of view as well. Yuri Gagarin became a hero of mine: a forgotten pioneer (how many think John Glenn was the first human in space?) who was lost, like so many, way before his time.

I grew disenchanted as the space race, in which Gagarin had given the Bear a huge early lead, ended at the moon while life on earth didn't improve. I'm sad and angry that we still have wars and hunger and disease; I'm also disappointed that we've stopped reaching for the stars. Maybe humanity will pull itself together, and find the renewed energy and inspiration from within necessary to continue our truncated journey. Maybe the continuation won't come in my lifetime. But Mr. Baxter's moving tale gave me

a warm feeling, connecting the past to the future. The thought that Yuri Gagarin, the first human to gaze down on our blue globe from the void, could return to earth proud and smiling, pulling our own gaze spaceward once again, has improved my outlook immeasurably. Thank you, Stephen Baxter.

Bill Devins
Whippany, NJ

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I just finished reading "Zemlya," Stephen Baxter's wonderful short story about Yuri Gagarin, and want to thank you for choosing to publish it. Baxter's use of historical figures as protagonists reminded me of "The Franchise" (*Asimov's*, August 1993), John Kessel's spellbinding tale of Fidel Castro and George Bush. What I liked so much about "Zemlya," however, was the convincing scientific subplot of the evolution of Venus and of the life on it. I also marveled at the tragic image of Gagarin entering the Venusian atmosphere. I am left feeling that there is more to this story than the twelve pages Baxter has written so far.

I look forward to reading more of these compelling alternate realities in the pages of your magazine.

Leroy Gonzalez
New York, NY

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To all:

I just finished reading the January 1997 issue of *Asimov's*, and I must say that I found it to be excellent. I especially enjoyed G. David Nordley's "Messengers of Chaos." It was an interesting counterpoint to Tom Purdom's "Canary Land," in that these stories offer contrasting, yet not wholly contradictory, visions of humanity's future on the Moon.

Every story was terrific. Keep up the good work!

Stanbery Foster III
Olympia, WA

Dear *Asimov's* folk,

First, let me congratulate you all on a great magazine. As a sixteen-year-old, it is hard to get my hands on good SF since all the bookstores carry nothing but Trek and Star Wars. Your magazine, to which I have subscribed for a couple of years now, made me aware of the wide, varied world of science fiction. So I owe you my thanks. Anyway, I just read Daniel Marcus's great story, "Killed in the Ratings" (January 1997). What struck home was how possible the premise is—as I'm writing this, I have happened upon a TV show called *Real TV*. It's nothing but home videos of people getting beat up in riots and tossed around in storms. I also seem to remember ads for a TV show called *Animal Attacks* or something like that, which was home videos of people getting mauled by animals. Friendly stuff.

Peter Waldkirch
Vancouver, BC
Canada

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Although I have subscribed to, and enjoyed, *Asimov's* for many years, I am not in the habit of writing letters to its editor. Indeed, as best as I can recall, this is my first. The occasion for this unprecedented behavior is your February 1997 issue, in which I discovered three of the more appealing stories of recent memory. Two of these, "Call Me Titan" and "Three Hearings on the Existence of Snakes in the Human Bloodstream," were delightfully pointed satires—the latter especially successful in drawing out the litany of human weakness from an historically plausible backdrop. The third story, however, "One Good Juror," was among the most moving pieces of writing I have ever read, possibly because it shared the same glimmerings of spiritual victory as I had almost simultaneously enjoyed in the movie *Shine*. "One Good Juror" would make a splendid movie or play in its own right, perhaps shoving aside some of the shoddy work that currently occupies both the large and the small screen.

Bruce W. Chambers
Hamden, CT

Greetings to all,

This is my first actual letter to a magazine, per se, however I have written to *Asimov's* e-mail address in response to a story by Michael Bishop. This letter is in response to Mary Rosenblum and James Sarafin's excellent story in the February issue of your magazine, entitled "One Good Juror." I found

the story to be fresh and exciting, especially in the manner the authors brought the characters to life, from the attorney handling the victim's case to the juror to the victim and his artwork. I even felt as if I knew the holographic judge by the end of the story. I also felt as if I knew the law of the land in this story, and the authors were able to convey this to me in less than thirty-three pages! I was elated when things turned out well for all involved, except for the prosecution, of course, but then, he had a team working behind him, while the defense only had the one lawyer who questioned her own ability throughout the entire story.

In the past I have sometimes found collaborations tedious to read. I was timid about starting the Rosenblum/Sara-fin story. It is a delight to say that I was pleasantly surprised by it. Please publish more of their material in the future. This reader is greatly interested in any other work that they have written together.

Live Long and Prosper,

Philip J. Shirk
Houston, TX

Dear Mr. Silverberg,

I enjoyed the March issue of *Asimov's*. Your article, "Glimpses of the Future," on the way SF has predicted the future in the past was most enlightening. Don't worry. No one can predict all of the wonderful things the human mind can come up with, and who wants to. Truth can be stranger than fiction, which makes the world very interesting.

Brian Stableford's story, "Inside Out," about a drug that can help us contact our other selves in other dimensions, was both disturbing and intriguing. Disturbing in that we keep meeting the same type of people because of the same makeup of our personalities. Intriguing because of the wondrous maze of possibilities it opens up to us.

I enjoyed Kage Baker's story, "Noble Mold," about the vine that holds the secret to a major drug. I also like the idea of the far future sending people back to keep an eye on the past. I think we'll have outgrown the need for patents and pleasure drugs by the far future, though.

I enjoyed the idea of playing a baseball game for Babe Ruth's soul in "The Babe, the Iron Horse, and Mr. McGillicuddy." I'm glad that Mr. Comiskey ended up on the side of the devils, but wish that he hadn't taken the Black Sox with him. There were plenty of people like Pete Rose to take their place. Please, Mr. Bova and Mr. Wilder, write a story in which the Babe and the others find a way to redeem the Black Sox's contracts.

William Sanders' story, "The Undiscovered," about Shakespeare living among the Indians, was fun. It actually could have happened, which scares me. I agree with his attitude about those dumb critics who say that Shakespeare's plays were written by other people. With a grateful hand to Mr. Sanders and a boo to all those snobs, I shall close my letter with a thank you.

Frances L. Axtell
Champaign, IL

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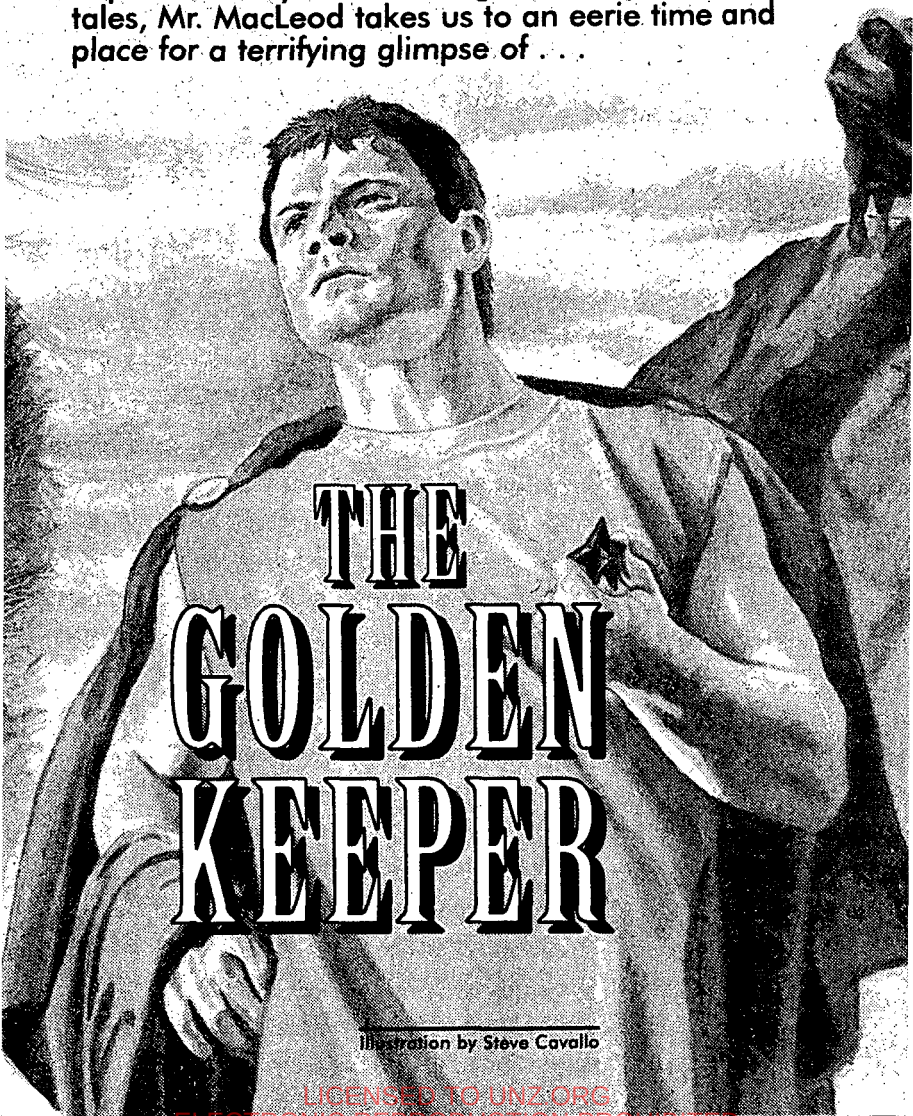
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Ian R. MacLeod

Ian MacLeod's novel, *The Golden Wheel*, is just out from Harcourt Brace, and his short story collection, *Voyages by Starlight*, will be out soon from Arkham House. In a departure in style and setting from his previous Asimov's tales, Mr. MacLeod takes us to an eerie time and place for a terrifying glimpse of . . .



THE GOLDEN KEEPER

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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My grandmother once told me that she witnessed the last ritual murder to occur in Rome. A young Vestal who had broken her vows was forced to watch the flogging to death of her lover before she was buried alive.

I was only a child then, living in the high house that has been my family's since the days of the Republic. Of course, I was curious. A few days later, I walked along Vicus Iugarius to the Forum. But what I found in the corner of the great square where my grandmother claimed to have stood hugging the folds of her nurse's cloak were sightseers harangued by barking orators as they thronged amid the stalls of moneylenders, flower-vendors and trinket sellers. On that day, even the Temple of the Vestals resembled a building site, with fresh marble decorations being chiseled as a statue to a Head Vestal was prepared for erection.

Still, in my innocence, I pressed my ear to the paving, imagining that I might still hear the Vestal woman's pleading screams as the newly turned soil filled her mouth above all the passing roar, perhaps even the flack of leather against her lover's flesh. I only found out many years later that unchaste Vestals were in fact immured within niches of the temple and left with a small supply of bread and water, although that still seems a strange kind of mercy.

Knowing the time that has passed since such practices took place, I wonder now if the tale is not one that my grandmother herself heard in her own youth, and passed down to me as if it were her own memory. But I remain sure that she intended it as some sort of lesson; which is why the tale returns to me now, when the sweeter ones with which she comforted my nights are forgotten. For I know now that even gods themselves may crumble with the dust of those who had served them. It even seems to me that the sacred fire of the Vestals will one day go out, and that the grand monuments and porphyry busts that our Emperors erect to themselves and their patron deities in the Forum will become nothing but tumbled blocks of masonry, the meaning of which men in some lost future time will argue over.

Here, in this new posting after my long journey up the Nile, I am surrounded by dead gods, old stone, dispossessed memories. I made detours at Heliopolis and at Memphis and again at Thebes to see some of the so-called splendors about which Herodotus and many others have written. Perhaps seven hundred years ago the efforts of these decadent and barbarous people to maintain the remnants of their history were more successful. For the most part, all I found were lopsided blocks of stone more like mountains than any work of man, broken pot shards, giant sand-buried heads and a few soot-stained tunnels that roared with flies as you entered them, and reeked of ordure and piss. The guides were generally stooped, wall-eyed, jabbering on about Isis and Osiris as if they imagined that such things were still the fashion in Rome. Frankly, I regret paying

them. I should have made my passage down the Nile with more speed, the sooner that my year's work here might be ended.

The Colossi at Memnon were the only monuments that in any way lived up to their promise. I visited them at dawn by raft just as the spring floods were abating, and they truly rose huge from the shining marsh. As is the custom, I pressed my ear to the graffitied stone to hear the marvel of its groaning. The other sightseers I was with professed disappointment, yet I must record that I heard—or at least thought I heard—something. A sound that came not so much from the enormous statues themselves as from the earth beneath them. The sound of an agonized wind. Shriill, high-pitched, echoing with the blood howl of some distant, terrible memory.

Let me describe myself to you now in what I intend will long remain the privacy of this journal. Let me imagine that these loose scraps of papyrus will be gazed at on some distant day by civilized eyes—and then understood, for I know that I make a poor scribe despite the efforts of my teachers.

I am Lucius Fabius Maximus. I was born thirty-three years ago in that high house in Rome. I have trained, reluctantly and at the bidding of my father, as an accountant in the class of Germanicus, and have since practiced with even greater reluctance in the Province of Sicily—and, it must be said in these days of dubious currencies, to little financial gain. On my father's recent death and with the slates of my family house falling, and our beloved villa above the sea at Naples becoming a ruin, I have been forced to volunteer for service overseas.

I must say that the thought of Egypt appealed to me, and I was surprised and flattered when, at the bidding of my patron Servilius Rufus, the Procurator agreed that I should go there instead of some damp bandit-raided fort in Gaul. I had imagined lush wheat fields, lakes filled with flamingos and tall reeds, bright flowers, sporting hippopotami, and tombs and temples filled with sacred treasure. But instead I have been posted here, up beyond Gebel Barkal and the cataracts, beyond the boundaries of our Empire. At the very rim of the world.

The sun here is a hot brand against your shoulder, and soon withers anything that attempts to grow. Yet even the lands of the delta that I passed through on my journey were less appealing to my sight than they had been in my mind. Upper Egypt may still be the grain basket of our Empire, yet it is also muddy, filled with insects, ugly savages, the stench of cattle. At least I can take comfort from the fact that, unlike my immediate predecessor, I have at least not come this far simply to be stricken by fever and sweat out the waters of my life. But I am sure that the bed in my quarters still stinks of him. I must ask, once again, to have it changed.

My dwelling here is a villa of sorts at Cul Holman, a place that once at-

tempted to become a town. It lies at the neck of a large valley, where the paths and gullies from the hills that form the last rampart against the desert finally join. I am responsible here for the counting houses, the weighing houses, fifty or so scribes, and upward of five hundred slaves. I am assisted in these duties by Taracus, a captain of the VII Cohort in command of two centurions who, whilst of pure blood, has never actually seen Rome. Otherwise, I must rely on Konchab, my slave foreman, and Alathn, my chief scribe. In my household, I also have Henrika, my treasured personal slave, a cook and perhaps a half score of slaves of both sexes; all of them local, and none in their prime.

The land here, east of the river, is heaped over itself in a way that gives the impression, as one first approaches, of soiled linen. The inclines are riddled with deep gorges, sudden drops, the cavè of old workings set high on the face of sun-bloodied cliffs. You know even as you stumble across some new vista from the base of a dried-up rill that you will never find it again without the help of guides. Elsewhere, there are many deep pits and heaps of rubble; the remains of earlier delvings for the gold that also brings me here. In this confusing maze, the sun himself often becomes unanchored within the sky. Not only do shadows shift and change so rapidly that a valley may become a ridge as you approach it, but a standing, beckoning figure may turn to a pillar of stone, then a blackened demon, then a man again, before vanishing entirely. The colors are so varied as the hours of the day change—and then again under the moon—that even now I cannot say with any certainty what the true shade of this rock through which the slaves burrow is.

I have a lump of the stuff beside me now on this desk as I write these words. Held close to the lamp, the fresh-broken side has a gleam almost of fish scales. It contains, I imagine, some ore which perhaps contributes to whatever subterranean process it is that produces the gold.

At midday, these hills become molten. Now, close to midnight and the time when I make my final inspection of the counting houses and the breaking rooms, they have the appearance not of hills at all, but of piled bones. They look cold, yet the heat still swarms against my flesh through these open shutters in gritty waves.

This truly is a terrible place.

I had guests at my dinner tonight. The wine came from my private purse and was brought from the vineyards of Heptanomia. The food I also prided myself in choosing, and was dealt with reasonably well by the cook. There were dates and figs. Capons stuffed with rice flavored with caraway. Fish baked in the aromatic leaves. A side of pig done in a charcoal bed. Fresh if somewhat gritty corn bread. A round of green-veined cheese. Roasted wild duck garnished with lemon. Soured cream with herbs. Decently flavored honey cakes. Nuts and hot pomegranate.

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For company, alas, I had to make do with my assistants Taracus, Konchab and Alathn, and also Kaliphus, the local pagarch, with his robes and his rings, his weak attempts to assume the manners of Rome, his disgusting habit, as he talks, of physically touching you. Those who abuse him, it is said, are speared alive on the giant reeds that grow in the silted canals around his palace.

Such is the balance of power here that none who were gathered this night could fully trust the other—nor yet act independently. Taracus knows that, despite his legionnaires, he relies on Kaliphus to collect the taxes that pay his and their salaries, whilst the wealth of Kaliphus and his fellow Egypto-Greeks would be nothing without the might of Rome. As local slave master, Konchab relies upon them both for the threat of force and the provision of his slaves: whilst Alathn, who supervises the counting and weighing, seeks their security in the tricky business of monitoring the traffic of the rock that will eventually yield gold. I, whilst supposedly in overall command, hold a post that is changed yearly so that its occupant may gain no upper hand. Thus, even in this empty place, are the calculations of power that assure the everlasting greatness of Rome.

The wind, for once, rose less strongly than usual, and at first we were able to eat with the shutters open and the doors drawn wide to the courtyard, where the pool had been cleared of its slime and refilled from the cisterns of a nearby slave village. My servants, well-briefed for once, laid out scented vials to keep the insects at bay, and the lanterns were well-filled with oil. The tapestries that I had had hung to disguise the peeling decay of these walls drifted and flowed, bringing life to scenes of cool forests, white pavilions, gods and animals. I would not have chosen my companions, yet for a while I could almost imagine that I was back amid the pines of Rome.

Alathn, the chief scribe, showed his lack of breeding by raising a matter of work; some small discrepancy in the records of the sweepings of the counting house floors. Almost a dwarf, foul-breathed and toothless, with his shoulders hunched sideways, Alathn has an obsessive proficiency with numbers, and seemingly no interest in the wealth they record. Taracus suggested that such problems were easily enough dealt with by the application of the brand or the bastinado by his soldiers.

The local pagarch Kaliphus at least provided me the favor of listening to my opinions when I tried to improve the conversation. I was speaking of gods by the fourth course when the hot night wind began to rise, and the doors and shutters were closed that they might cease their banging. I opined that there were so many gods now, so many faiths, that no sane man should be expected to honor them.

"Perhaps," Kaliphus said in his high, poorly accented voice, "the universe truly is filled with many conflicting deities. Not simply those of

Olympus, but also Baal-Hadad and the new- and old-style Jehovah and Ahura Mazda and Isis. Perhaps they all—and many others whom we have forgotten about or not yet learned to fear—exist in their different realms. . . .” He smiled. “Would that not explain the chaos and conflict in this world? The fact that we are trapped between them in their fight for dominion. . . .?”

Taracus, of course, disagreed. He is a plain soldier who doubtless makes his tribute to the Jupiter and dabbles his finger in a bowl of blood before he orders the slaughter of some local tribe. Yet I, who choose to worship no gods and view the world as a mere interaction of the elements, somehow found Kaliphus's ideas persuasive.

“Romans such as you, Lucius Fabius,” Kaliphus continued, “have always portrayed your Gods in madness and conflict, and have added ever more—even your own Emperors—to their list.”

Full by now with the wine, we all ended up bidding the servants help us from the table to inspect the villa's wooden cupboard-shrine, as if it might offer some proof. I confess that, in my days here, I had not even looked at the thing. Clearly old, and yet cheaply made, the dry leather hinges creaked with neglect as we opened them. Yet I admit I felt a small twinge of anticipation; the vague hope that a devout predecessor might have left some tribute of value behind. In that, I was disappointed. Yet, as the five of us breathed in the oddly sour air that seemed to emanate from inside, we all seemed to forget for a moment what argument it was that this inspection was supposed to settle.

The contents of the shrine were ordinary enough. A small statuette of a dancing boy, with his head broken off. A blue glass bowl that held the sticky residue of some kind of offering. A dried-up piece of salt-cake, a few mundane prayers on wax tablets, and a five-pointed star of greenish soapstone. The latter was new to me, and clearly of some age, chipped and worn, marked with odd dots and signs, yet well-made, almost warm. As I held it in my hand, Kaliphus backed away and seemed to mutter something, making an odd protective sign. I cannot imagine that the thing has any real value, but I will take it with me when I return to Rome.

As we reclined back on our couches, and on the pretext of continuing the discussion, I asked Kaliphus if he knew of any remains in this area from the great Egyptian dynasties. He replied that there was nothing more than a few carvings in dangerous and otherwise empty caves, and pillars and blocks that were more probably the work of the wind.

“After all,” he shrugged, “these hills have been empty in all the time of man. No one would ever come here but for the gold.”

There is little else to record of my evening. Now that the guests have left, I am glad of my solitude again. Even civilized company always leaves me feeling thus. Sometimes, a panic rises in me as I lie at a well-

stocked table and realize that I am surrounded by the flesh of other bodies.

Still, the occasion went passably, and in Kaliphus I must seek an ally. "You have done a splendid job tonight, Fabius Maximus," he said to me as his entourage rode up. "And with such servants—so old, I couldn't help noticing. Yet in a man there are also other needs. . . ." Here, he made an unfamiliar yet disgustingly obvious gesture. "Perhaps I will send to the markets at Pathgrais for you, and see what can be obtained."

I took the offer without comment.

Now, the night draws long. The servants are abed. A few of Konchab's dogs are howling, and the wind howls and screams with them. But for the lantern-lights of a few sleepy sentries, all of Cul Holman lies dark beneath me. Whilst I still have energy to hold back sleep, I must make my final inspections.

This afternoon, I mounted and rode alone but for Konchab to inspect the mines. In truth, I needed to escape Cul Holman after being required by the ever-punctilious Alathn to confirm that a few precious scraps of papyrus, ink, and a writing implement were missing from one of the scribe rooms, and to authorize the required punishment. Knowing that the four scribes in question had been chosen as an example rather than for any responsibility, I settled for the bastinado rather than the brand. I had never seen it used before, and had wrongly imagined that wounds to the soles of the feet, whilst scarring, would be less damaging than a hot iron applied to the face.

The mines are easy to find from the donkey tracks leading into the hills, the heaped dirt, and the sound, long before you reach a final turn, of hammering and shouting. Here, under the merciless sun, beneath the distant and skull-like gaze of the many worked-out pits and caves that pock-mark the hills beyond, near-naked slaves burrow and hammer. After I had inspected the grey-colored lumps that constitute the produce of these mines, Konchab drew me further up an arid slope and showed me a place where the hill had been swept away in the blackening wind to reveal a floor of rock that cannot have seen the sun in all recorded time.

Konchab is muscled, tanned, a mixed product of all the local breeds. He shaves his head in the manner of the natives and goes bare-chested most of the time. I had never imagined that he was burdened with much thought. Yet here he showed me an incredible thing. For on this bare rock there were markings, as if living remains had been worked into the stone. Some were strange to me, yet others were unmistakably in the likeness of seaweed and fanning arms of coral. Here, certainly, were the bones of an odd-looking fish. I noticed also the coiled shell of a giant snail, and a large creature somewhat between a squid and a woodlouse. Stranger still were the large triangular marks that bore all the appear-

ance of footprints. I am no scholar, yet here seems to be evidence that this high arid land once lay, unimaginably long ago, deep beneath the sea. Either that, or I witnessed some folly of the gods that I profess not to believe in.

Now, as I write these words, the vision seems fanciful. I almost doubt my eyes, which feel tired, eroded as if from inside by the heat and the sand. As I rode back from my inspection, the sun seemed to shift and dance about the bottomless sky, haloed within a ring of swarming darkness. Such was my weariness that, looking up as I rode amid pillars of rock too high to be climbed, I was sure that I saw a figure, wind-wrapped in ragged black clothing, looking down at me. I once even thought to see its face beneath the hood as it turned toward me, yet revealed only the harsh flash of the reflected sun.

Back at Cul Holman, the late afternoon sky was yet hotter and darker, and there was word that one of the slave-scribes had already died from the effects of the bastinado. I wandered amid the block-buildings and the heaps of discarded rubble, and watched as the donkeys bore down their loaded panniers from the mines, guarded as always by Taracus's soldiers and Konchab's chained and growling dogs. There is much weighing and counting in the making of gold. There are scribes at the mouths of the pits and caves, and again here at Cul Holman, where all is checked and weighed even as the donkeys shed their panniers. At each process of the shifting and breaking, and forever closely supervised by Alathn, records are made and re-made. The penalty for any serious discrepancy is death—and the reward for those who report a culprit is freedom if a slave, or money for a freeman. As you, my reader, may imagine, false reporting is a greater problem than theft.

At the end of it all, in the final counting house sheds and after days of weighing, discarding, sifting, and breaking, the gritty rubble that remains still has none of the appearance of gold. Alathn tells me that this stuff, which is weighed and recorded yet again by two independent scribes, contains about one fiftieth of its weight in pure gold. Sometimes, of course, a small nugget is found, or a few glimmering grains may be glimpsed at this final stage, but for the most part it would be hard for any observer to understand what we were producing. It is certainly not as I expected before I came here. The final sifting of the residue requires much water—an element that is even scarcer here in these mountains than the gold—and takes place many leagues' journey down beside the Nile in the beds and pans at Tarsil. I am reminded once again of how cleverly our Empire divides its power.

At nights here, I find myself dreaming of gold. Of beaten gold, caskets of gold, jeweled hinges made marvelous to contain yet more golden soft intricate nuggets. And my grandmother sits once again beside me on her drawn-up stool. She tells of Catechuan, who walked to the moon on its

path across the ocean, and of Midas, whose touch transformed everything to gold. Hearing her voice, I feel the softness of gold against my teeth, its warm pure smoothness beneath my hands. I breathe a mist of gold and slip though gold-clad shafts into secret treasured lands where the stars shine differently and gold flows in shining rivers and its dust forms the glowing sand.

When my ship from Ostia first arrived at Alexandria on my way here, I spent the days wandering the streets and markets, seeing the sights, visiting the disappointingly decrepit lighthouse and library. Famously, the city is a greater hotbed for new sects, seers, prophets, and charlatans than even Jerusalem. Yet as a man who prides himself on his rationality, my interest lay in the oft-repeated claim that gold can be created from the combining of other elements. There was talk of a creature named Zosimus, almost fabled, so it seemed, and certainly shy of the public attention that most other so-called scientists and seers craved. Yet finally I tracked him down, or at least someone who claimed to be him, on the late afternoon of the last day before I set out on the long final leg of this journey.

Led by a guide, and clutching a knife beneath my toga, I plunged deeper and deeper into the dubious back streets that writhe around the low hills in the east of Alexandria. The rats, or whatever creatures scurried at the corner of my eyes, grew bigger, and the few people I glimpsed in dark doorways and alleys were even less well-favored than those I had grown used to. Although some way from the port, a predominantly fishy smell combined with all the usual reeks of humanity and decay. Finally, when I was thinking of running even though I had no idea of where to run to, I was led through a curtained doorway.

Here, my memory becomes vague. I suspect that the air was drugged by the smoke that writhed upward from the many glowing chalices hanging from the low ceiling. The man who called himself Zosimus was bulge-eyed, his skin beneath his voluminous shifting robes not so much black as blackened. He talked in a strange, droning voice, the meaning of which seems to depart even as I think of it now. Suffice to say that I feared an ambush and did not detain myself long in his hovel. For once, I truly did thank the gods when my hurrying feet drew me back toward familiar squares.

Kaliphus has, just as he had undertaken, obliged me with a gift.

For these last few days, I have been possessed of two fresh slaves. She is named Alya. He is Dahib. They are young, fit, and, as far as I am ever able to tell these things, well-favored. They may be brother and sister, or in some other way related.

You, my reader, will not know that I am repulsed by the intimate pleasures of the flesh, and have been so all my life. These two creatures are

thus of no use to me in the erotic ways that Kaliphus doubtless intended. The boy Dahib, in fact, has the habits of an animal. After Henrika's efforts to teach him a few rudiments of house-craft failed, I had Konchab take him to work with the other able-bodied creatures up in the mines. Alya, though, I have kept for myself. She has a grace of manner, and speaks a comprehensible version of the Roman tongue. She has cleaned and re-ordered my private rooms, and bears flowers with thick purple petals each evening from some hidden place. Their scent brings some coolness to the hours of the night.

In taking Dahib to join one of his mining gangs, Konchab muttered that he and Alya were of a tribe of nomads from the desert beyond these hills, recently captured and thus far too close to their home and their freedom to be trusted. In truth, as I gaze at Alya as she stoops and works with her braided hair, her pure blue eyes, the sense that she brings of somewhere else, I truly wonder how she would have reacted if I had been a man of baser appetites.

Bad news comes to me this midday from my patron Servilius Rufus in Rome. Now that the accounts of my father's wealth have been finalized and the full extent of penury can no longer be hidden, the creditors of my family are demanding full settlement.

For now, I can do no more than make vague but tantalizing promises about the fresh wealth that I had hoped to return with from here. It pains me to realize that I will have to sell off the villa and vineyard near Naples on my return—if I can find a buyer. It pains me yet more to know that even that will not be enough.

For all this, I have not been idle on the matter of discovering some valuable ancient relic since I raised the matter over dinner with Kaliphus. Some of the caves in which I have wandered with the slave guides bear traces of being not mine-delvings, but narrow tombs. I have excavated a line of them that look down over the spoil heaps of Cul Holman. Sometimes these narrow pits contain versions of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and I have also discovered a number of the star-shaped soapstones, dot-marked and with a central indentation, much like the one in the shrine. They are clearly ancient, yet of no seeming value or purpose. Otherwise, I have found nothing but dust and, once, and disastrously for one of the slaves, a nest of poisonous snakes.

What, I can't help wondering, happened to all the supposedly great wealth of the Pharaohs? If the tales are to be believed, they buried their princes and kings in sarcophagi made of solid gold, which were decorated in turn with incredible jewels, and then laid in vast gilded subterranean vaults filled with amazing riches, the better that they might enjoy the next world without losing all the fruits of this. In Memphis, Giza, and Thebes, I can well understand that nothing is left now after all the ages

of digging and banditry. But here at Cul Holman, at the very place where much of the gold must once have been mined, might there still not be some forgotten remnant? All I ask for, truly, is one still-sealed door, a mere antechamber—a single relic, if the relics were truly as great as is rumored.

Yet even as I write this, hope fails me. I know what the digging of gold is like here. I know how little comes from all the efforts of Rome. To entomb a man, to gild a room, to form statues and vases and make vast ceremonial necklaces—all of this would take more gold than could ever have come from these hills even when the seams were richer, or from any other place on earth.

Often in the night, it now seems that my grandmother is beside me, telling tales that fill my sleep. Her familiar voice murmurs once again of King Midas; of how, once Bacchus released him from his gift, he came to hate all wealth and splendor and dwelt in the country as a worshipper of Pan. I smile at the thought of those cool forests and the quivering piping of the reeds, then half-awaken in the hot stirring darkness of Cul Holman and the stink of this bed. Yet it almost seems as if a dark figure within a robe's brown shifting folds is still with me, and that there is a shrill piping, weird and unhuman—ungodly, even—as the wind screams in these hills.

Dreaming thus as I am each night, and with the grim prospect I face when I return to Rome, I find myself thinking much of the past, and of my father. After all the years when he deceived and squandered and borrowed against what I had fondly imagined was my own rightful wealth, I can see him as little more than a bloated monster. And what caprice was it that made him choose my calling in, of all possible professions, accountancy? I could, after all, have been a lawyer—a soldier, even—perhaps a legate. But instead, I am cursed to study these figures that speak of a richness I can never touch, trapped in a calling that, it seems now, has brought me by some unrelenting logic to this terrible place.

My father had me summoned to him once when I was nine or ten years old. It was the morning of a summer's day in our Naples villa when a pale sweet haze hung over the headlands. It was not a time of day, from the little I knew of my father's habits, that he was likely to be up, and thus I was all the more surprised that he wanted to see me. Even in its decline, I still think of that villa as a place of shifting light, of the scent of orange groves mingled with sea air. Yet my father's quarters were shuttered, curtained, still lamp-lit. I doubt if he even realized it was morning.

Everyone said that my father had grown in the years since my mother had died in giving me birth, but I saw the man so little that I had come to imagine he was some kind of giant. But he was little taller in stature than I, and had the same elongated chin, the same face that seems

mournful even when it is smiling, the same large brown eyes, the same long nose. Every time I look in a mirror, I still see my father welling up before me. But my father's face was framed in fat, puffed out as if by some internal pressure and patched by white and red blotches that drifted and changed like the clouds.

This world, he told me in a voice that was both high-pitched and rumbling, is a place of secrets. There is little you can expect to trust, although in youth you may strive to do so. But when you reach my age, you will realize that your actions are merely the performance of a ritual designed to appease powers of which you will never have any understanding. We are all, in everything we do in our lives, the acolytes and priests of nothingness.

Such was the sum total of the knowledge that my father chose to pass on to me. He had been raised in the bad years and spiraling prices of Gallienus's worthless coinage, when the wealth of my family must largely have disappeared. Yet somehow he managed to borrow and confuse and keep at bay the creditors who now assail me. No wonder, surrounded by a charade of wealth that he used to fool all those around him, that he took a dark view of the world. Nor that he finally ended his life by casting himself down the well in the villa's courtyard. Perhaps the only surprise is that the vast bulk of his body fitted.

On that morning that he summoned me, my father bade me eat with him. I had to watch the fruits and breads and cheeses disappear into his mouth, washed down by the wine that the pampered servants on whom he also sated his other needs brought to him. He bid me eat from the heaped plates, although I could barely pick at the stuff. When I hoped the process had come to an end, but more feared a gap between courses, he asked me if I would like to see some gold. Grateful for any diversion, I agreed.

He stood up from his couch with difficulty, and lumbered over to one of the many tall stone vessels that were half-set into the carpeted paving. He lifted the lid of one, and reached in. Looming over me with a small casket of scented wood, he turned the catch to open it and bid me look inside. It contained several leaves of a shining material, so thin that I feared they would disintegrate if I breathed too strongly. Closing the box, keeping it close to the huge folds of his belly, my father shuffled back toward his couch, and called the servants to bring yet more food—strawberries, for it was the time of year when the villa gardens filled with their scent.

The fruit were laid before us on a plate of bronze. My father reached into the scented wooden box and lifted out one of the fragments of leaf. He wrapped a strawberry in it, placed it in his mouth and chewed with his mouth set apart in a grin, flakes of metal dissolving with the pink fruit and threads of saliva. Then he selected another strawberry and fold-

ed it within the delicate leaf. His fingers as he held the thing out and commanded me to eat were coated in the remains of all the other things he had eaten, and his nails were coarse. I had never known it was so difficult to take something within my lips and swallow.

Thus, between us, my father and I got through a dozen leaves and a large plate of strawberries. The metal was almost tasteless, and grazed my teeth before it folded and dissolved within my mouth. At the end of the process, my father belched. When, with a single gesture of his hand, he waved both me and the foul air that he had made away, and I ran down from the villa into vineyards, to lie gasping for air amid the droning insects and the lacy shadows of the hot sun. A little time later, I found myself bent double in the corner of the field as all that I had been forced to eat came back out of me. There was no sign, within the usual traces of the vomit, of anything resembling gold, and I was weak and feverish for days. To this day, I hate the taste of strawberries.

Enough, enough. How the wind howls and shrieks here at night! I must raise myself now and make my final inspections of the counting houses before the guards change. And hope for better dreams.

To the palace of Kaliphus this day, to return the favor of his visit to Cul Holman.

A longer journey than I imagined, but at least it took me out of these hills. Closer to the true waters of the Nile, there is at least some vegetation. Indeed, here are grown many of the crops that keep us. Once, the ditches and canals must have been filled with each spring inundation. But most now are dry or impossibly silted, and the villages are poor, stinking places.

Kaliphus's palace lies at the center of what I suppose must once have been called a town. I was reminded of my wanderings in Alexandria as my entourage was forced to dismount to make our way through the narrow, disordered streets. Here, it almost seemed, were the same ill-made faces, the same filthy textures of shadow, the same darkly draped and shifting figures. The same fishy stink.

Rising out of these hovels, Kaliphus's palace was larger than I'd imagined, and constructed in the main of stone. When I inspected the halls and columned entrances, I realized that most of it had been pillaged from ancient sites. The slabs were broken, lopsided, worked into different colors and ages, with all the usual hieroglyphs, the scarabs and the birds. Within the palace, beneath the bright but crudely dyed tapestries and rugs, I even glimpsed walls made of fine and more clearly blocklike sections, with markings that reminded me of the soapstone in my villa's wooden altar.

Most of my conversation with Kaliphus was devoted to the tribute the boatmen of Rasind aré demanding, or was too trivial to record. The food

was poorer than that which I had given him, and ill-flavored with alien spices, but I finally thanked him over ale for the gift of the slaves.

Kaliphus explained that Alya and Dahib were members of a desert tribe who had been captured in some minor war, and thus brought to the markets at Pathgris. The remainder of her family still served in his palace.

"But there is some sport, is there not, in breaking a new horse?" he said when I mentioned Konchab's doubts about such slaves. "And anyway, you have nothing to fear as long as I keep the rest of the family here. You need do no more than tell me of any, ah, refusal . . ."

Sick at heart, I nodded.

"Their kind make *interesting* slaves," he added. "Simply because they do not believe they are slaves. It is like keeping a wild bird, touching the fluttering brightness of its feathers, teaching it not to damage itself. Watching it sing . . ."

The chief scribe Alathn was waiting for me beside the counting houses when I finally got back this evening to Cul Holman. He was more than usually agitated, concerned about some tedious discrepancy in the accounts. Once again, it was the records of the sweepings of the counting house floors. Unlike most such things here, these are not kept in duplicate, and can only be checked approximately against the amounts that are inevitably lost as the refined dust is ladled in and out of the great scales.

Watching the weighing process as I often do, or visiting the counting houses in my nightly wanderings, I am reminded of the tale of the dog-headed Egyptian god Anubis, who once enjoyed a minor cult in Rome. He was often portrayed weighing the souls of the dead on similar scales. About Alathn, of course, there is no such poetry. He argues that, whilst the recorded weight of the sweepings of the floors has actually increased in the time since I have arrived here, the amount of gold that is eventually extracted from this mixture of desert dust, hair, foot-scrappings and an occasional fallen grain has dropped noticeably. I did my best to dismiss him with promises that I would take command of the matter myself. He refused, though, my direct request that he hand over the relevant scrolls on the excuse that they were not fully completed.

The man is odious. I know I cannot trust him.

Today, and the days before that, I have devoted myself to the pursuit of the relics that, since my visit to the palace of Kaliphus, I am once again certain must reside somewhere in these hills. Konchab has grudgingly released four of his better and younger slaves on the pretext of looking for new gold seams—but of course, if any such were found, they would belong not to me, but to the Empire.

It is dark, troublesome work. I do not fully trust the slaves to explore the many pits and caves as fully as they might, and I have sometimes

had to delve beneath the ground myself. Inside the few sealed caves I have been able to find, the air still has the odd, faintly sweet smell of antiquity. Undisturbed for untold centuries, there comes a whispering, a faint muttering and crackling of echoing movement as the entombed bodies crumble to dust in the new air. Pushing on, coughing through this ancient decay, I am often forced to use the smaller of the tar-wrapped bodies as brands to light my way. Yet it is all to no avail. The only relics I have been able to find are a few more of the greenish star-shaped soapstones. I have now, in total, twenty-three of the things, which I keep in a pile beside my trunk in this room.

Once in my explorations, moving forward too hastily toward the back of a cave, the ground began to give beneath me, and my makeshift brand was extinguished. In a darkness of dust and bones, my mouth began to fill. Luckily, I was soon dragged out and carried coughing into the harsh light outside the cave.

I cannot imagine a worse way to die.

Last night, I dreamed once again that my grandmother was sitting beside me. Each time, the tales she speaks of change and unfold. I am no longer sure whether I am witnessing a memory, a portent, or merely fantasy.

When I look straight at her, she appears black, wizened as an old date; even her eyes are a blood-threaded brown, giving way to the darkness of immense pupils. Her words are often hard to follow, they seem to fade in and out of my hearing and buzz like the rattle of a loose shutter or the droning of a trapped insect. The meaning also ebbs and flows. Sometimes it could be the Roman tongue, at others the mutterings of some crude local dialect, then again it becomes something else stranger and darker that sounds more in my head than in the hissing air.

When I look away at the hangings on the walls, I see stars and dots and cuneiform signs that may be decoration or some kind of lettering. And my grandmother seems to shift and change at the edges of my sight. It is almost as if she is folding in upon herself. Her limbs slide together like a bird preening its feathers, then her whole body diminishes and yet regrows within strange angles. It is, as her voice rises and falls and slips in and out of my comprehension, as if I am looking at her from some other place entirely.

Now, she speaks to me of the old Greek gods, and I witness their sport in ancient Thessaly where there was once a blue lake surrounded by mountains as high as the sky. In this luxuriant country of the dead, over which dark Pheraia reigned and the dead rose from cracks in the ground to flood the plains, Apollo himself was forced to slave for a Great Year, which is the time it takes for all the stars in the heavens to return to their original positions.

But here, my grandmother begins to tell of things of which my waking mind knows she had no knowledge. A Great Year, she tells me, lasts for twenty-six thousand of our earth years. And she speaks of how, before the Greeks, the Pharaohs also studied the stars. They, too, marked the slow progress of the Great Year, and little doubted that their dynasties would live through it. Indeed, such was the certainty of the Pharaohs that when their astronomers discovered a small miscalculation in the earth's own short year, it was decreed that they wait some fifteen hundred years to make their amendment until the seasons had returned to their rightful place.

Yet even before the Pharaohs and their eventual fading, there were other powers, and even creatures that bore no resemblance to men. My grandmother speaks of bearded Assyrians who rode their chariots and built temples toward the skies. And yet before them there were lost kingdoms, now long-forgotten, who carried the last wisdom of another distant age when the Old Ones came down from the stars on incredible wings, fleeing some impossible darkness. The Old Ones, too, built cities gaudy and vast that are now lost beneath the oceans, although they thrived and prospered for many ages before man. But the darkness they finally fled was inescapable, for it lay outside even the vastest turnings of the universe and time. Mind-wrenching beasts that the Old Ones themselves had once tamed broke loose from their bounds, and for a numberless age, all space was riven by the incomprehensible horror of Azathoth and her minions. . . .

Although by now I have little comprehension of what the buzzing voice of my dream-grandmother means, those last words seem to strike some special nerve, and I look up at her, pleading that she end this tale. At this point, my eyes did seem to open, and I was returned to Cul Holman, the distant howling of dogs and the screeching wind that caused the hangings of the room to sway. But my grandmother leaned closer over me and opened her mouth once again, as if to resume her tale. Nothing came out but a foul rushing blackness, and I saw, as it gaped wide above me like the maw of a great snake, that the mouth of the thing my grandmother had become had filled with stars.

I could not sleep the rest of the night. My throat was dry from the dust of those hidden graves, and from the screaming horror of my dreams. I summoned the slave girl Alya to bring me wine and keep me company, and I commanded as I drank that she tell me whatever tales she knew of daylight and some better place and age.

Alya's tribe, it seems, are traders, people such as those who follow the salt road to Tripoli. They are proud and loyal, and move with horses and creatures named camels that in all my time here I have only glimpsed from afar. To them, the desert is like some ocean upon which they drift and fight and trade, in the way a mariner plies the seas. Like mariners,

they love their chosen element, and know its dangers and moods as few who ever lived.

She spoke of frost in the desert at midnight, of the pure white blindness of midday, and the slow-turning roof of the stars. Sand can be hard and harsh, or smooth as silk, soft as water. The dunes may move overnight—drown you as you sleep like the rising of a storm-wave, or remain unchanged for centuries. Each wind carries a different taste, each day a different shade and substance to the horizon. There are deserts of sand, deserts of bare rock, deserts of smooth or jagged stones, deserts of ancient forests where dead trees stand in leafless perfection, sand-smoothed and polished to a different beauty, rising on their roots as if ready to walk in search of water. There are mountains and lowlands. Dream cities of spires, temples, colonnades and glorious fountains shimmering above the plains.

Alya and her people have always known of the Nile. There was once even a time when they were the true dwellers beside her shores, and when the desert was still a green wilderness of cedar and pine, and meadows and waterfalls scented even these hills. It was her people, Alya claims, who built the first great works that the Pharaohs were later to claim as their own. Amongst these, and although she can never have glimpsed them, she numbers the pyramids at Giza, some sand-buried work she calls the Great Sphinx, and the temples of Seti at Abydos. They were made, she says, with magics that are now lost to mankind.

By the time of the reign of the Thirty-One Dynasties many centuries after, her people had long been nomads. They traded and learned the new languages, and watched through the slow ages as other great civilizations rose and fell. They saw the coming of the Assyrians and the Minoans and the Greeks and the Phoenicians and the Romans, they wandered amid the ploughed and salted ruins of Carthage. When they learned that their own great relics had been appropriated and restored as tombs of the Pharaohs, they wondered how anyone could credit them as simply the works of man. But all of this her people accepted without regret—even the reworking into new forms of their treasures of gold. . . .

I was half-sleepy by then, and the fears of the night had departed me now that Cul Holman's few scrawny cocks were crowing. But at the last words Alya spoke, I was fully awake in a moment, although I did my best to hide my eagerness.

"These ruins that you speak of," I said to her. "Surely they must exist in other places than the Lower Nile if the civilization you speak of was as great as you claim?"

She nodded at that, although there was suspicion in her eyes. It was as if, sensing that I was near to sleeping, she had been spinning her words to herself more than to me, and now regretted what she had spoken.

"In my own small way, I am something of a scholar," I said. "I would be

interested if you could tell me where you think such ruins might still be, or perhaps even show. . . ."

She stiffened again, and stared long at the ground.

"Of course," I prompted, "someone in a position such as mine would have ways of expressing their gratitude."

"You must give me freedom," she said, looking back up at me with a sudden boldness that was not of a slave. "Freedom to myself and to Dahib, and also to my people who still suffer in Kaliphus's stinking hive."

I was taken aback; that someone of her kind should attempt to negotiate with me! Yet there was something about her talk of ancient gold and magic that rang true. Almost as if she had spoken not of the past, but of that which my dreams were already striving to foretell.

"If you do what you offer," I said, "On my honor as a man of Rome, I agree to give you what you ask."

"Then," she said, blinking the light from her eyes as the first flash of the sun rising through these shutters cast the rest of her into deeper gloom, "I will show you."

A day of wonders and disappointments.

Yes, there are tombs and ruins beyond the age of the Pharaohs within the far reaches of these hills—Alya has shown them to me—but they are wind-riddled, empty, almost unimaginably desolate. Yet there are other, deeper twists within this whole story.

On the assumption that Alya could ride, I had arranged for two sturdy ponies, but she assured me that they would be of little use on the route that we would be taking, to where these hills make their final rampart against the desert. Normally, I would never have set out on such a journey on foot, least of all in the dubious company of a single female slave—but you, my dear and honored reader, will understand by now my need for discretion and secrecy. And Alya was in no doubt about the instructions I had left with Taracus as to what should be done to Dahib and the rest of her people should I fail to return.

The heat was already rising, forming a haze over Cul Holman like some evil storm cloud. Following Alya's quick heels into the shadow of the cliff and then along a hidden vale, I was glad to be away.

It was a long journey, keeping to secret routes. I know now where the places are that Alya collects her strange, dark-scented flowers. They grow like crystal in hidden profusion from the very rocks, in what seems like the total absence of water. Sometimes, in the distance, we heard the shouts and hammerings of the mines, yet along the narrow gullies which she led me, we never glimpsed them, nor yet were seen. As the sun finally rose above the shadowed rock walls, I knew that she had already led me far.

I remembered, as I paused to take the food and drink Alya had carried

with her, that Konchab had warned me about these deep clefts that lay in places beyond the mines. We had already stepped over the antique bones of many unwary goats and jackals, and as we rested and the hot afternoon wind began to rise, the air pressing through the narrow walls began to whistle and scream.

The sound grew louder as we moved on, filling my ears, making speech almost impossible. These hills are burrowed and threaded as if with the airways of some vast musical instrument that I can still hear echoing across Cul Holman as I write these words. As we clambered our way through twists and turns and the wind's wild shrieking grew yet louder and the maze more complex, I began to doubt whether Alya had any real idea of where we were going. What could *she* possibly know, anyway? Just some memory of the fables of her ancestors.

It was then, leaning against the rock to catch my breath, that I saw just how incredibly smooth the surface of these gullies had become. It was almost as if, through some unimaginable process, they had actually been constructed. I lifted a fallen flint and experimentally struck it against the smooth wall. The stone eventually shattered, leaving no mark whatever. Alya watched and twisted her hands as if, in this empty, shrieking place, she was somehow made anxious by the noise.

The gullies became still better formed as we moved on—and more elaborate, drawn in twists and turns as if by the pen of some insane architect. And with each turn, the harsh piping of the wind grew louder. There was still greater evidence, here, of the bodies of fallen animals, some so recent that they seethed with flies, and others piled into ancient heaps that Alya and I had to climb over. I was surprised at this, as I had always imagined these hills to contain little life. And would so many full-grown animals be as foolhardy as to lose their footing in this way? Unless, that is, they had been brought here, and then purposefully thrown in as some kind of tribute. Forcing myself to inspect one or two of the cleaner corpses, I saw that their skulls were often missing, the vertebrae torn almost as if they had been bitten off, and sometimes coated with the remnants of a blackish-green sticky substance that I was not able, and would not have wanted, to have named.

Above us now, the rocks piled in a greater impression of order, of huge squared blocks suggestive of buildings. Yet the wind-driven heat of afternoon was now so intense that they had only a loose sense of substance, like cities seen in a dream. I saw also, or thought I saw, a black-robed figure. I could only reason with myself that it appeared too often, in too many places at impossible angles of accessibility, to be human, or real. And I saw now as we finally began to climb upward from the gullies, that there were fallen pillars, walls truly made of giant blocks of stone, wind-rotted remains of shapes that might once have been statues.

We came then, as evening was settling, to the sloped walls of a fastness

that rose high against the cliffs at the far edge of the mountains. It was a long climb to ascend the huge blocks of which it was constructed, and Alya often paused and waited for me, offering a hand, which in my weariness I was then forced to take. I had already resigned myself to the fact that we would have to make our way back to Cul Holman under the moon and stars, or else camp in some remote shelter. But despite this, despite the shortness of my breath, I was truly excited.

We stood in the last of the dusk at what seemed like the final edge of the world. Beyond these mountains and the great crumbling walls of the edifice over which we had climbed, reddened with the last of the sun to the color of drying blood, lay the shifting blue-grey immensity of the desert. Here it was possible, as I rubbed my scraped and bruised limbs, to believe the writings of such as Eratosthenes and Ptolemy—that the world is a globe floating in vast emptiness, and that we are all but ants upon it.

But the sight that drew me more was the single great block-pillared entrance set into the cliff-face above. With the light already passing, I was anxious to find my way inside before full darkness fell. But when we had scrambled up the last stone courses and stepped inside the vast portico, the sun, suffused in the whirlings and dust clouds of some far-distant storm, cast long rays of a thick grey light that were somehow regathered on the facings of granite. It was as if this was the precise moment that we were expected to enter.

Yet, after the initial thrill of discovery, my feelings became those of disappointment. I was slow, as we stepped into the glowing shadows of that great squared archway and saw a vast and well-made passage stretching ahead set with the dark outlines of many entrances and openings, to appreciate the most obvious fact of all. Alya made a sign that was like the one that Kaliphus had made beside the shrine at my villa, muttering to me that this place was filled with old magics, and that on no account should anything be taken. But, although clearly intact, this edifice was also open; unsealed, difficult to access, but certainly not hidden. It had long been emptied of all treasures.

Looking up at the roof, I saw the smoke tracks of lanterns, whilst in places the smooth faces of the walls were chipped and scrawled with crude Egyptian hieroglyphs. The protective eye of Horus was much repeated, although here it was gazing inward on both sides of the tunnel, instead of looking just to the left. There were even signs, marks in the dust that lay on the floor of the dragging and trailing of some pointed object, of recent habitation.

As we moved in and the light of the entrance began to fade, I put a spark to the torch that Alya had brought with us. Yet, despite the dark that had fallen outside, the place never grew entirely black. Within the tunnels and shafts, strangely shaped rooms and turns and alcoves, many

narrow slits had been hewn, through some art that escapes me, rising far up through the stone to open out on the mountainside. Even now, they admitted enough of the moon and stars to give some light—and often the impression, as some new vista was revealed, of glowing heaps of precious objects, twisting amorphous forms or beckoning shadows that, as we grew closer, always turned out to be nothing but faint stirrings of air and dust.

It was clear to me from the fearful, watchful way that Alya looked about her, and her wariness as we turned each new corner, that the knowledge that had brought us this far had departed her. In fact, I doubted even then that this was truly the work of her ancestors. Yet at the same time, I observed her reverence as she touched the strange dots and carvings that began to appear on the walls, and the way she pursed her lips as if she, an illiterate, were attempting to read them.

I had, whilst I was there, the strong impression that the place was a vast and empty tomb, but now I wonder if there was not some other purpose. From the faint, malignant odor that pervaded the place, I expected at each turn to reach a mass of poorly mummified bodies or the bloody mess of some ancient sacrificial table. Yet the smell ebbed and flowed with the wind's piping, which somehow penetrated the very furthest depths I was able to reach.

The only sign of recent human habitation was, in its way, fortunate. Just as the flames were starting to fade on my torch and I knew that I would have to turn back, I stumbled upon a larger and more roughly made brand that some other recent wanderer had dropped. It was only some passages later, when I was forced to put light to the thing, that I realized that the weight around the bottom, which I had imagined to be a handle, was in fact a human hand, severed at the wrist, and coated in the same ichor that I had noticed about the bones of the fallen animals in the gullies.

I gave a cry, then prized the thing off and flung it away. But the whole incident was too much for Alya. She turned and ran, sobbing, back the way we had come. I watched her go without attempting to call her back, but hoping for my own sake that the moonlight fanning from the narrow slits would be enough to guide her back to the surface, and that there she would wait for me. The severed hand, I noticed, shriveled and writhed through the process of some long-withheld contraction, moving briefly across the stone before finally collapsing in a twisted heap.

Fear is a strange thing. You, my reader, may well have imagined that it was with me at that moment as I stood alone in the depths of this strange, ancient palace, yet in truth, only now in reflection does a chill begin to gather, a sense of unease, almost as if a part of me was still there in that vast empty palace, forever lost and wandering.

Sadly, there is little else of interest in my explorations to relate. It oc-

curs to me, though, that I should record some other of my impressions. In the absence of gold, perhaps I could keep at least a few of my creditors at bay by writing some fatuous history or novel about the place.

The tunnels are complex. I have almost the impression of an inwardly constructed fortress based around some central keep or core. The sudden turns, the many small alcoves and rooms into which a soldier or a priest might turn to lose or outwit an assailant, bear witness to that fact. The other point that would argue toward this are the shafts. There were many within the tunnels—and not of the narrow type that I have already described for the purposes of letting in light and air. These were wide and immensely deep, with narrow walkways at their sides, thankfully still sound, around which I was forced to make my way. The air that came up from these pits was shockingly foul. Much like the shallower versions of such shafts that I witnessed in the tombs at Thebes, I imagine that they were traps for the unwanted visitor. Either that, or they were used as the gullies were for the casting down of sacrifices.

But I remain, I confess, confused as to the essential purpose of these shafts. Now, weary as I am this night, it even strikes me that they were some vertical equivalent of the horizontal tunnels that I passed along, although their sides were so smooth, the depths so deep, that I cannot imagine what other use they could have been put to.

As to the passages themselves, I should record that the dots and carvings grew more intricate as I pressed further, although most were strange to me. I stopped, though, at a few places where somewhat newer slabs had been affixed to the walls, although these too were ancient, and many had fallen aside or cracked and crumbled. On these there was an almost Egyptian style of marking, although much changed. There were carved scenes too, that might once have been colorful when the gilt and the paint still held to them. I saw men and women with eyes much like Alya's, gathering corn, drawing water, going about life's unchanging tasks.

In other places, I saw what I can only take to be scenes from the construction of the great pyramids. Once again, many people were shown going about these tasks. There were supervisors too, and in places what I took to be the draped and oddly shifting forms of human figures—perhaps some kind of priesthood. I had passed several such slabs before I noticed another shape. Before that, I had taken it to be the destructive hacking of ancient graffiti. But the form recurred—if form it can be called—representing, I supposed, some feared chaotic deity whom the priests were supposed to keep at bay. Now, though, another explanation occurs to me. Certainly, if I am to turn my discoveries into a novel rather than a history, I would now say that the amorphous thing that the priests surrounded was the representation of an actual being.

Alya had spoken of the magics that her people had used to build the

great pyramids and the other monoliths. Perhaps the truth is that they used this hideous shifting creature—for I can scarcely imagine that there is room in this universe for more than one—in the great labor of breaking and shifting the stones. I can well imagine that its escape from the priest's control would have brought the downfall of a civilization, persistent rumors of ancient magic, and the many myths of some destructive flood or holocaust. It all makes a type of sense, although it strikes me now that night at Cul Holman is not the best place to dwell upon it.

Finally, I turned back within the tunnels, hoping that I would be able to find my way back out again. In fact, the choices were surprisingly easy. The foul shrieking wind that rose up, I was by now almost sure, from the pits themselves, seemed to push and lead me as I worked my way around them. When my borrowed brand finally died, I found that I was already near to the surface, and that the narrow upward shafts admitted threads of dawn. Thus my mood was calm as I walked back toward the square-set portals overlooking the desert. In this new brightness, I could almost glimpse the protective shadows of those long-dead priests standing guard around me, leading me on, murmuring prayers of protection.

In the last of the side-rooms into which I peered, drawn by a stronger glow of light, I saw a wider space than I had anticipated; a roof borne up by great squared pillars. The light shafts here were numerous, and angled in such a way that they crossed and threaded at a point near the hall's—or temple's, I might now call it—center, and threw its far reaches into flowing drifts of shadow. There, caught in the web of light, hung a central core that was ill-defined in shape. It was an illusion that I had become used to in my explorations, but still I felt drawn to cross the surprising vastness of the hall on the chance that I might at last have stumbled across some valuable relic.

As I drew close to the web of light, the ball of shadow it contained began to shrink, but, for once, it did not disappear entirely when I reached it. Lying as if recently discarded upon the floor, I found a lump of stone, black, multi-faceted, like some complex kind of dice. I have the thing beside me on the table now, and would record how many sides it has, if I were able to count them exactly. It is heavy for its size, and rubbed at my thigh in the pouch where I carried it. Even now, my flesh aches at that point, as if it were burned. The thing is too large to hide under the loose tiles beneath my bed where I hoard these notes and what little other wealth I have acquired here. To keep it from the prying eyes of my servants, I will bundle it up in my trunk that lies beside my valueless heap of starstones. If I spin it sufficiently well into the tale I plan to write, who knows? I may even be able to sell it.

What else is there to record?—little other than that Alya was indeed waiting for me beside the great blocks of the entrance way, sitting with

her hands clasped around her knees and shivering even though she was in the full warmth of the rising sun. That same sun then led us back here to Cul Holman without confusion, although the way was long and weary, and it was the edge of another evening when we finally came into taste, sight, and hearing of its dust clouds and hammerings.

Alya called to me as I made to enter my private quarters.

"Lucius Fabius," she said, raising her voice above the mad barking of Konchab's dogs which had begun with our arrival. I started in surprise and turned back to her, that she dared to use my given names. "I call on you now to fulfill the bargain we made."

I, of course, asked her what bargain she meant, and reminded her that I had expected her to lead me to hidden riches and gold. How, otherwise, could I buy the freedom of her entire family from Kaliphus—or even that of her and Dahib? At that, she looked at me. But she had the sense not to argue.

"At least, Lucius Fabius," she said, casting off the goatskin and pack she had been carrying. "I ask you that you at least release Dahib from his work in the pits at Dylath, before he dies of it."

To that, I agreed. Dahib will start menial work at the counting houses this morrow-morn.

And now I must to bed. I am far too weary to proceed with my usual late-night inspection.

They say that the seasons change but little in this place, and then only about the Nile. Yet, as what might otherwise be called autumn passes and we face the beginnings of winter, I am sure that Cul Holman has grown hotter. The sun blazes. Sour heat breathes from the rocks at night. I have the slaves bring water and fan me as I lie abed or try to set about my labors. My body sweats as I toss and turn.

I confess that I am grown irritable. Only yesterday, for no other reason than that he stumbled amid the rocks where he was working and I thus had to walk around him, I ordered the flogging of a slave. And news has reached me of the ill-fortune of my patron Servilius Rufus, and of the bewildering demands of my father's bankers, creditors, and clients.

Everything is bad, and I am too weary to give the details. At least, though, I am now past a half year in this dreadful place. Were the days not still so many, and the prospects of my return to Rome so grim, I could almost begin to count them.

In my dreams, I find that I am still often wandering the strange catacombs to which Alya took me, which in turn become once more the stinking streets of Alexandria under leaden skies, which unfailingly lead, if I cannot awaken myself, toward the dark-draped room of the villa in Naples in which I slept as a child, and where something that is no longer my grandmother awaits me. And even when I cannot hear her words

amid the swarming dimness, the shrieking of these mountains that somehow penetrates even the deepest of my dreams, I know that it is always speaking of gold.

Gold, which has traits far beyond the pliancy, glamour, and incorruptibility that men so innocently crave. Gold, which claims ascendancy in a rubric of elements vaster than anything Aristotle conceived, and lies close to the point beyond which this universe must dissolve. Gold, which gives onto other places, other times. A million unfolding doors. Gibbous lines of insanity.

At the worst moment, it seems that I am falling, pushed down and through and under by a stifling weight. Strong hands then reach up to rescue me, and I am lifted into the light of some vast place amid the strangest of buildings. There are angles and shapes that my eyes can hardly comprehend, a sky that has a texture and a color that can never have been of this earth. And I am surrounded by vast, ugly star-headed creatures, and I know that I am lost—unimaginably so.

Yet still I reach toward them.

Now that I am a little better, and although the weakness of the fever that I suffered is still upon me, I can look back on this last entry—and the odder suppositions with which I laced my record of my trip beyond the mountains—with a clearer perspective.

Perhaps the malady that killed my predecessor at last caught up with me. It could have been the foul vapors of those catacombs. Whatever, I am still sane and alive. After the terrible depths of the fever, I must do my best to be grateful. A full month has now passed since my last record, and already, my replacement will be setting out from Rome. For that, also, I must be grateful. Konchab and Taracus have proved themselves more than capable of running these mines without me, and even the miserly Alathn seems happy once again with the regularity of his accounts. I suspect they all welcomed the resumption of their independence. Alya, at the worst of my fever, closed and re-closed the shutters that flew open in the shrieking madness of the wind. Even Kaliphus has been to see me, and left fresh fruit and rose water, and a suggestion that I have the pile of starstones immediately disposed of—which hints well that they might have some small value.

I saw a dark, wind-flapping figure standing high on a rock above the pits at Dylath when I finally roused myself to make an inspection with Konchab this morning. Some of Taracus's soldiers happened to be about, and I ordered that they attempt to capture whatever it was that I was seeing. Soon, I was face to face with an elderly shepherd, quivering with fear, stinking in his filthy robes. Such was my relief that I laughed and I bid him released back to his starving flock.

All would be better but for the return to Rome, and with it the final

loss of the wealth of my family. Childless, and with no desire to correct that situation, my only sister enfeebled by her long ugly face and no prospect of a dowry, it almost seems that I must now contemplate the end of my family's once-dignified name.

The days now drag interminably. There is the ordering of the new slaves, and much bargaining for tributes and fees with money I do not even control. Yet I throw myself into this work with a new passion, and do my best to demonstrate to Alathn the breadth of my expensively acquired education by ploughing through Cul Holman's intricate accounts.

In the dust, in the very air here, hang fragments of gold. I sometimes think I see their glimmering when the sun falls in some new way, or shining on the limbs of the slaves as they emerge from the pits as if transformed into intricate gilded machines. In truth, I must have breathed in a little of the stuff along with all this foul air, so that it now infuses the humors of my body.

This last night, I was assailed by yet another foul dream. In it, I found that once more I lay beside the changing and sliding shape that was once my grandmother, although now I fear her form. In a ghastly, buzzing voice, it speaks to me only of darkness and atrocities. Times when the star-headed Old Ones had to flee their great cities from a timeless wind that flooded beyond the stars. As the tapestries billow around us and the wind shrieks, I sense the near-presence of shambling amorphous entities.

"There was once and is and always will be the three-lobed burning eye," the creature begins. "It was named Nyarlathotep, by one who dared so to name it, and briefly called himself the Golden Keeper. But these are only sounds, and he was but the seed. . . ." At that, she cackled. Within a vast maw, teeth gleamed. "What it truly feasts upon is terror and debasement. It needs no meaning. It lurks forever beyond all comprehension, writhing at the back of everything. . . ."

Behind the beating curtains and the thinning walls of the room that I must share with whatever my grandmother has become, I sense the scratching and sliding of something massive, bearing before it an insane stench. I know, then, that were I to even glimpse it, my mind would dissolve. But still I sense that this is all part of some ghastly ritual. That, somehow, I am being prepared.

I awoke, slimed with sweat, to the howl of the wind and the persistent barking of Konchab's dogs. Even then, the curtains of the room still seemed to sway and flutter, and I sensed the fading of some terrible disturbance, and a crouching weight lay upon my head. All of this, as you my trusted reader may well imagine, left me in a poor mood for the meeting that Alathn had requested this morning.

As he talked at his usual tedious length about the intricate principles and procedures of his work, I glanced at Konchab and Taracus, my two

other companions, and sensed that they were already pondering other duties. Perhaps, I mused, this ugly dwarf was always thus—and nothing will ever come of the discrepancies of which he speaks.

"Gold," Alathn said, in what I hoped was his conclusion, "has a greater weight than stone or all other metals. It tends to sink and gather. Of course, this is the very principle upon which it is collected amid the pans, pools, and washing fleeces at Tarsil."

Here, as if this was all of some especial relevance, he licked his thin lips and glanced boldly at me.

"For this same reason," he continued, "there have been surprisingly rich finds made amid the sweepings of the counting house floors. Many small grains and even nuggets are thus recovered. And within this last year, the weight of these sweepings have gone up noticeably. Yet we have recovered barely any of the expected gold they can be expected to yield."

At this point, I had opened my mouth to say that the records of such gathering would only be found by the washing beds in Tarsil. But Alathn then laid his hand upon the pale tube of a freshly copied papyrus, and I could guess what it was. I should have admonished him that he had ordered scribe-work done at Tarsil without my authority, but my mind was blurred.

"In truth," he went on after he had explained all that these new figures meant, "I fear we have all taken too small a care of this particular matter. It needs, after all, little more than for a weighing pan to be nudged, or a sleeve to be brushed across the top of a loaded pannier. And each night, the sweepings are guarded by one . . ." Here Taracus bridled, although Alathn didn't actually say *sleepy*. ". . . centurion. We are faced, I fear, with a small plot to deprive Rome of its rightful wealth. A minor conspiracy . . ."

I have, my trusted reader, no reason to lie to you—for the small bag containing what pitiful amount of gold I have been able to collect by the means that Alathn so carefully outlined lies hidden beneath the same paving bed as I keep these scraps of my writing. On the evidence of either, I would be condemned. Of course, the grains amount to a fraction of what I would need to regain the good name of my family. But if I were to shed my identity, to move cheaply into some minor but decently furnished place . . . you, knowing all that you know, will understand that it is the least I can do; to permit myself a small, hopeful dream after all the nightmares that have assailed me.

From there, the meeting proceeded along a predictable path. Alathn confessed that he could name no specific culprit, as is usually the case in these matters. But whilst he spoke, he fixed his gaze shamelessly upon me. As my junior and lesser, of impure and polluted blood, he knows that he cannot make the accusation that he longs to make alone. Of course, if Konchab and Taracus were also to take his view, things would be differ-

ent. But their manner remained unchanged. If they suspected me also, they made the wise decision not to risk their careers over such a matter.

Logic thus compelled me to agree with Taracus when he suggested that, as this fraud follows on from a long trail of minor stupidities and disobediences, the time had come to make a proper example. With new slaves recently arrived and our quotas in all other respects well up, it would be an appropriate gesture. I mentioned, of course, the brand, the bastinado. But it was clear by then that stronger measures were required.

"It is sometimes necessary," Taracus opined, "just as a gardener must prune and weed to ensure the best blooms, that a number of slaves must be put to death if the whole body of them are to thrive."

I nodded, thinking of my beloved villa in Naples, and wondering what this brutal man had ever even known of the dewy sun-washed fragrance of a proper garden.

"I would suggest, Fabius Lucius," he continued, "that ten is a simple number that brooks no argument, to be chosen equally from amid the counting house slaves. Of course, the manner of their death must also be an example, something that will stick well in their primitive minds. Mere spearing . . ."

Through all of this part of the discussion, Alathn remained silent. But I knew that he kept his eyes fixed on me. I understood his feeble tactic well enough: he imagined that I, a Roman, would weaken like his own retarded race at the prospect that was now laid before me. Of the suffering of others for a crime of which he knew I was guilty. But if this truly was his trap, I passed over it easily. Death amongst slaves is as natural as it is to the beasts of the farm—especially here at Cul Holman. If it were not the sweepings of the counting house floors that brought about these executions, it would soon be some other matter.

Thus determined, I took the lead, and the discussion proceeded apace. We agreed that, as crucifixion uses too much rare and valuable wood required for pit-props and hammers, the slaves should be immured; buried alive within some of the many openings in the ravaged hills that overlook Cul Holman, and left to die there.

As is my duty this following morning, I stood witness as the slaves were selected. They were then chained before they were dragged up the hillside, closely supervised near the precipices in case they should attempt to end their lives in an easier way. I stayed within the camp and watched as the figures dwindled in the hot grey light, thinking once again how we are mere ants upon the face of this world, and how little anything that we do matters.

The stone masons, still visible at the narrow pits that had been chosen, soon began their work, and the ring of struck stone and the cries of the slaves came distantly on the hot shrieking wind, to mingle with the

moans and weepings of those who watched. Little enough work was done at Cul Holman this day despite the lashes of Konchab and his supervisors, and the threat that he would loose his already wildly excited dogs from their pens. Occasionally, for the greater good it fosters within our Empire, such prices must be paid.

I write now in the early part of the night, and all of Cul Holman seems strangely dark, strangely agitated. More than ever, the wind howls. The dogs will not quieten. But for that, I suspect I would also be able to hear the sleepless wailing of the slaves. Although those selected have been immured without the added mockery of food and water, it will still be necessary for the narrow pits in which they lie to be guarded for several days. Their deaths will not be quick—crushed together in the hot infinite darkness, flesh against flesh against unyielding stone, barely able to breathe, unable to move. But then who knows what finally kills any man, beyond thirst, hunger and lack of hope?

I write again after an unwarranted interruption. Without my calling or seeking Henrika's permission, the slave girl Alya has come to my quarters. Sensing some presence in the room as I finished writing my previous words, I turned and saw her standing in the doorway. For a moment, I confess I almost felt a flood of relief that it was her and not something else, until irritation took over. Still, the girl has nerve. For that I must credit her.

"I have come to plead with you, Fabius Lucius," she said.

"Well and good," I said, remembering that we had bargained before, and wondering if there was perhaps still some knowledge that she held back from me. "What is it that you want?"

"Dahib."

"Dahib?" I repeated, puzzled, before I remembered. "Indeed. He was brought here with you, and I recall that I was generous enough to have him relieved from his duties in the pits . . . and moved to sweeping the counting house floors."

She gestured wildly then, and I saw as she stepped closer into the flickering and tonight oddly dim light that her eyes and face were shining with tears. "He's buried—dying."

I nodded, wondering that I hadn't recognized him in the process of selection. But then, all slaves soon look alike when they labor here. "Understand, Alya, that the choice wasn't mine."

"What can I give you," she interrupted, "to free him?"

I shrugged, easily keeping my composure. "I am a rich man already. But then I am also a collector. That place that you showed me. Is there perhaps another—somewhere that has *not* been emptied?"

She stepped back from me then, almost as if in horror, and shook her head. For a moment, her eyes traveled wildly about the room, like those of some trapped animal. I saw them widen and she gave a gasp as they

settled on my grey-green collection of starstones piled in the room's far corner. And I noted that, tonight, a special light seemed to be within the stones; like the phosphorescence that lies at the edge of the tide.

"Otherwise," I continued, "there is nothing I can do. You must understand that I am not some flesh-hungry beast like Kaliphus. I—"

But that was an end to our bargaining. At that point, Alya turned and fled. I have since summoned Henrika and a half dozen centurions, but she has gone from the villa, and seemingly also Cul Holman. I suspect that in her folly she will try to climb the cliffs where Dahib is immured. But she will find the way guarded.

Before Henrika and the soldiers left me again to what I had hoped on this disturbed night would be my slumbers, I asked for him to bring more lamps, and to add oil to all the existing ones. Even then, I asked him if he also noticed an odd effect, doubtless from some coming storm, in the way that the light seemed to hang in close spheres around the flame without passing further. He agreed, of course, but I do not think that the truth had penetrated his pagan senses.

A dark closeness now lies upon all of Cul Holman. Konchab's dogs are barking wildly, but for once the winds have ceased. The air hangs still, infused with this preternatural blackness, and there is a prickly sense of waiting that I associate with thunderstorms. Yet the only rumble comes from the beat of my heart.

Just this moment, as I reached toward the iron ink pot to replenish my nib, a greenish spark flew out from my hand. I have heard from mariners of just such an effect in storms; and also of the crawling of the skin, the rising of the hair, the suffocating sense of expectancy, although I have previously witnessed only the flash of clouds over the rain-swathed bay of Naples and the green hills of Rome.

No wind, and yet something within me seems to be blown wildly as if by a mad silent gale. In this itchy uncertainty, with the need always to look behind my back at the starstones and the lamps that withhold their suffocated light in the thick mass of darkness, there is clearly no prospect of sleep. This night, indeed, seems to me quite unlike any other, and yet ordained, much in the way that my presence here was—and, before that, the death of my father.

Much, it now seems to me, comes back to that. Now that we know each other well, trusted reader, and we seemingly have this night to share together, I will record a tale that will otherwise reach no eyes. Let me tell how, when I returned to Rome from the tedium of my duties as accountant in Sicily, little enriched and much in need of solace, I was greeted in the street outside my family's high house by the sight of wagons and carts. Too weary to take notice, I pushed my way through, only to find myself restrained and led toward a small group that included my sister and a few of our more elderly servants, all of whom were sobbing.

Understand, reader, that until that moment I had imagined that the drudgery of my work as an accountant was but a preparation for my true responsibilities as head of my family. Such things, I had reasoned, were not uncommon. Even as I learnt of the repossession of the furnishing of my house and the sale of my best slaves, I did not assume this indicated the loss of my family's wealth—but simple bad management of finances by my increasingly degenerate father.

Yet I was in a foul mood after I had made what arrangements I could from my own meager purse, and rode in haste toward Naples. In other moments, such a journey would have given the chance for cooler reflection. But anger only seemed to grow within me; and a sense of destiny.

As I dismounted at nightfall four days later and my feet clattered on loose mosaic through the villa's moldering halls, I remembered the time when I had been summoned to eat leaf-gilded strawberries. And as my face was brushed by cobwebs and rotting hangings, I remembered also the sickness that had come upon me afterward—when gold is prized by apothecaries, and taken by those who can afford it for its powers of goodness and healing. It was then, even before I reached my father's presence, that the first worm of doubt began to slide within me. How, for so long, could I have ignored this decay, when it could all be put down to the simplest of explanations?

The few servants that my father still kept about him were drunkenly abed, or had absconded entirely. Yet I knew as I threw open the last doors into that windowless inner chamber that he would be waiting for me.

He lay as always upon his great couch on the dais, and the place was filled with the sweet stench of rancid oil and perfume. He had grown yet more in the year since I had last seen him. His flesh shone coldly with sweat, and his vast stomach tumbled out in a slippery mass from his dank robes. His tiny eyes regarded me from his swollen face, whilst his chin sloped down, white-mottled and immense like a toad's.

"So now you come to me," he said in that voice that was broken into two pieces—both high and low.

"I came," I began, "before it is too late—"

But here his wild, chilling laughter interrupted me.

"My son," he shrieked, "it was too late long ago! It was too late before you were born!"

"We need money," I said. "Money to pay off the creditors who have ransacked our house in Rome. We need gold."

"Ah, *gold* . . ." His body quivered again at the word, as if he were about to recommence laughing. But—as far as I could tell—his face remained grave. Looking up at him, I felt as impotent as a child. "Go, then," he whispered, leaning forward with a sound of sickly sliding, "go and look for your gold. . . ."

Moving slowly around the dais, at first fearing some joke, I crossed to the line of great jars inset into the paving that he had opened for me long ago, and lifted the lid of the first, and placed my hand deep inside. It was empty. As was the next, and the next. As they all were. Dragging down rotting hangings, kicking over chests and boxes, I found nothing but dust and leaves. Admittedly there were a few coins; worthless radiati and fake aurei that I could bite through with my teeth.

Twisting his head this way and that, my father watched as I moved behind him, his tiny hands quivering at the ends of his immense arms. He made a breathless eager panting that soon became a high-pitched giggling, then a growling belch of laughter. His shining face grew livid.

In my anger, I raised one of the caskets and threw it toward him, but it seemed to slow in the thick dark air and broke on the paving in shards of thin wood and metal. He bellowed at that as though the laughter would break him, greasy beads of tears and sweat flowing down his face, and I realized then that he had long anticipated this moment, like the maturing of a sour wine.

I shouted at him that he was a degenerate, a disgrace to all the honor of Rome. At the mention of honor, his laughter only increased.

This, then, was the state to which I had been dragged—to face a future of meaningless penury. And I was filled by a new and even greater anger. I was a high-born Roman, yet my life seemed to have passed from my control. Understand, now, reader, how much against my nature it was to climb the dais to my father's couch and strike him. Anyway, my efforts were useless, and only increased his laughter—it was like punching rotten dough. I had my small dagger about me, and I ploughed that into him, too, rending his clothes, slicing his thighs, his belly, his chest. But the blade cut nothing but white layers of fat, and did not even cause him to bleed. Enveloped in his stench, I seemed to be falling into him, the shrieking pit of his mouth, the quivering wounds I had opened.

At some point in all of this, the weight of our struggles caused the couch beneath us to break with a tearing of wood and the sparkling scatter of cheap glass beads and fake ornaments. My father began to slide from it—and I with him, although thankfully we separated as I tumbled from the steps of the dais, or I fear that I would have been crushed, suffocated, drowned.

As it was, I climbed to my feet, and looked down at him as he lay sprawled, my greasy dagger still in my hand. He was but a spill of flesh; scarcely human, more like some rotting sea-leviathan. Yet from the discordant whistle of his breathing, I knew that he was still alive.

He had fallen almost entirely upon one great carpet. Experimentally, I lifted a corner and tried to drag it. His weight was immense, but a power was upon me. Somehow, I hauled my father though the doorway and along the corridors which I had come, and thence out into the open court-

yard that contains the villa's well. There is no lip, and the aperture, once I had removed the iron grating, is wide and square. And deep also, so that I could never catch the glimmer of water when I peered down it as a child, nor be sure, when I cast a surreptitious stone, that the faint splash I finally heard wasn't simply the chattering of birdsong in the near woods. Yet for all of that, I almost doubted that my father would fit into the well. His gross limbs sprawled out as I heaved him off the carpet, snagging on the topmost stones even as the rest of him slid into it. I was forced, like a midwife in reverse, to work and push at his slick flesh until the last part of him gave way. Even then, he was slow in his descent down the dank sides of mossy stone. There was even a moment, looking down, when I was sure I saw the pale glint of movement as he began to climb back out. But then there was a great sound of ripping and sliding; and a gust of foul air as the last of his body's resistance gave way. That night, I truly did hear a thickly echoing splash as my father's body finally struck water.

I dragged the carpet back to his quarters, and left the place otherwise as it was, in disarray, and with the well's iron grating removed. In what remained of the darkness, and unseen by all but the creatures of the night, I rode off toward the hills.

That, my reader, almost marks the end of this bitter little story. I dwelt the next night at a roadside inn, and spoke loudly of how I was heading toward Naples from Rome. I arrived once again at the villa the next noon, to find much commotion. A day-woman's efforts to draw water had already revealed my father's presence, and local workmen were already laboring to extract him.

Too swollen to be recovered whole, my father was being hauled up in pieces. It was easy enough for me to display shock and surprise; and secretly to note as the glistening lumps of his body rose out on ropes how well the evidence of our struggles had been obliterated. As to the chaos of empty jars and broken caskets, I was able to offer an explanation that was all too easily borne out by a subsequent inspection of the family accounts: driven by penury and the thought of the loss of our family's great name, my father had chosen to kill himself. Would, I thought in darker moments as I pondered my future, that he had followed the tradition of older time in such matters, and also killed me.

Once the initial labors and inquiries had finished and a show had been made of grieving, it seemed wise to seek a posting in some distant place before my creditors began to regather—which, by a long route, brings me back here to Cul Holman, to this night where the darkness still hangs, and there is a windless creaking tension. From somewhere, I sense a faint smell of burning, and my body seems to

What was that?

I saw a scorpion scuttle across the floor beside me, and then another.

Several moths and gaudy insects have flown out from the window into the darkness instead of, as is their nature, toward the light. A rustling stream of cockroaches have made their way toward some crack in the wall that I do not remember seeing. And now there is silence. At last, even Konchab's dogs have ceased their barking. In this stillness, the earth seems to hold her breath. From somewhere comes the smell of burning. Looking behind me for a poorly trimmed lamp, I see that all the flames hang still as amber beads—and give as little light. Yet upon the starstones, there lies an intricate pattern of fine silver lines. Oddest of all, clear and almost reassuring amid this blackness, a grey stream of smoke is rising from the sides of my trunk.

I must

There marks a fitting end to that night's journal, and to the much that has happened since. I assure you, dear reader, that I am still alive and well. Indeed, I am well and wealthier than I could ever have expected.

I should have realized that the dense silence and other strange portents at Cul Holman signaled more than a mere storm. Indeed, I am somewhat angered that Konchab, Taracus, and Alathn, with their greater knowledge of this place, did not see fit to warn me. But they also professed innocence at the greatness of what was to occur, and I am currently in a mood to forgive them.

If, as Virgil contends, earthquakes truly are the restlessness of giants sleeping deep beneath the earth, then what has occurred here must have been caused by the greatest of them all. I can smile now at my unreasoning fear as the world shook loose from her anchors, as the walls that sheltered me moved and the villa's roof rattled in a rain of tiles, whilst from the darkness beyond came a massive groaning and rumbling that deafened the ears and sickened the belly. A strange glow seemed to rise. The stifled flames of the lamps suddenly spat great tongues of spark. Veins of fire ran along the walls and floor—even through my hands as I looked down at them. After all the portents and horrors I have been subjected to, I truly believed that the universe was coming apart, to be replaced by—I know not what.

But, in echoes and groans, the rumbling slowly died, and then, for the first time that night, fading as if already from some long way off, came the piping and whistling of the wind, to be replaced as it, in turn, died, by the screams of the slaves, and the hiss and clatter of settling dust and masonry.

Dawn came then, as if the sun finally had shaken loose from the earth in the process, and never more grateful was I to see his light. I emerged, as did many others, into a broken and rearranged world. I can see now

the dark silhouettes amid the drifting mist—but this journal is not the place to record the damage, and the work of reconstruction that has gone on in these recent days. I am preparing, in fact, a report that I propose to submit to the Senate upon my return to Rome, which will doubtless be copied into other libraries should you wish to refer to it.

For the purpose of this, my truer journal, let me say that the very crudeness of Cul Holman—the low stone dwellings, widely scattered—meant there was none of the vast loss of life that there might have been from an earthquake in a more civilized place. Still, there were numerous injuries amongst freemen and slaves—and in the buildings and workings of their trades.

It was only when I made my first inspection into the hills beyond this valley this morning that I realized the true enormity of what has taken place. Clouded by the risen dust, the light itself had changed, yet had a clarity it had lacked before. The hills seemed more solid. New fissures of rock had reared up, peaks had fallen, cliff-faces had broken.

Truly, the earthquake was the author of strange events, which would have been put down in more primitive times to the work of gods. One of the counting house sheds seems have been bodily moved; more amazing still, a small quantity of gold was found lying upon the scales when all the wreckage was removed. I myself have seen, in the dust around this villa, evidence of incredible stirrings that I could have taken to be dragging clawmarks were I a man of lesser knowledge. And, as far as it is possible to tell amid the new face of the hills that overlook us, the imprisoned slaves were shaken out from their graves by the movement of the earth, and thus released. Of them—and of Alya—there is no sign, although the soldiers who had been stationed to guard them, and also Konchab's dogs (although I, for one, am glad to be rid of their ceaseless howling) were found strangely beheaded, their torn necks coated in a foul greenish-black ichor, which I can only presume rose up from some deep portion of the earth.

At some point in the afternoon after the earthquake, weary of issuing instructions and the cries of the wounded, deprived of an entire night's sleep, I went back to this room in the villa that the servants had made some small effort to tidy, and laid myself clothed upon the bed.

I scarcely knew that I was asleep, yet it seemed to me that I saw once again, as if from afar, the vast, strangely angled cities of which I have sometimes found myself dreaming. They are built from huge blocks of stone set and faced with shining gems, and in truth I felt a sadness to know that what I saw lay so impossibly far in the past that all but the faintest remnant has faded. For I recognized that they were made in the manner of the ruins to which Alya had taken me; and not by man, who was not even upon the face of the earth at this far time, but by great beings, star-headed and with many strange limbs, who moved on the pads

of three triangular feet. Despite their ugliness, I felt a sense of kin; for I saw that, in their own alien way, they were wise and purposeful. These, I thought, are the Old Ones, whose wisdom trickled down through the eons in enough measure for Alya's ancestors to use it in the building, puny to them, yet still vast by our human standards, of the great pyramids. My sense of distance was redoubled by the knowledge that these creatures would ultimately be obliterated by a mad darkness. But here, it seemed to me as they moved within their towering cities, they were at their prime. The whole earth was theirs, from the highest mountains to the deepest trenches of the sea. And they looked upon the hellish creatures, whom they bid do their work using only the power of their minds, with contempt. They ruled everything. They knew no doubt.

Such, then, was the vision that was presented to me—and I, a Roman, at last witnessed a race with whom I could converse as an equal, had these creatures but mouths and eyes and ears. I watched, charmed more than repelled, as the Old Ones went about the incomprehensible business of their lives beneath the strangely colored skies of a lost ancient earth. I saw on shining walls the dot-markings with which I have become familiar, and heard, or thought I heard, a sweeter version of the piping that carried so often on the wind. I saw, also, many of the starstones, less worn but otherwise exactly like those I have collected, and glowing with fine inscriptions. These, I noted, were passed between the creatures by their odd appendages, and I soon reached the conclusion that they were a coinage of sorts. But here the matter does not end, for I also saw several of the creatures bearing black, multi-sided stones like that which I found in the edifice at the edge of the mountains. They would place these at the center of a starstone, causing a strange transformation to take place. The starstone changed color, and the veins within it ceased to glow as it took on all the appearance of gold.

Reader, as you may imagine, I awoke with a start then. In the thin light of dusk, I hastened to my trunk, remembering as I opened it the smoke that I had seen coming from it on the previous night. Indeed, the whole contents were charred and soot-stained. As I reached through the ash of my ruined clothing and closed my hand around the many-sided black stone, the ground once more gave a faint growl. Masonry crackled, and again the slaves of Cul Holman began to weep and wail. But the tremor proved to be nothing—a mere settling back of the earth.

I gazed at the black stone, and picked up also one of the starstones, turning them both over. It seemed quite impossible that one thing thus angled should mate with the curved indent in the middle of the other, as I had seen in my vision. But the two artifacts fitted well when I tried them; so well that I could not separate them when they were joined. In fact, the lines within the starstone began to glow, and it became so hot that I dropped it to the floor. Within a moment, too quick to notice, the

starstone changed color. It gained a smooth golden luster and—for I discovered that both objects were immediately cold, and could be separated easily—had increased greatly in weight. Then I placed the black-faceted stone within the center of another starstone, bringing about the same transformation.

Here, reader, you may imagine that I proceeded to transform all the starstones into what I could only conclude was gold. In fact, I performed the process only three times; and for the third, by way of an experiment, I used the most scratched and damaged of the stones, with two of its arms broken, although that also changed. But gold is a tricky substance to possess, especially here, and at that moment I still doubted the sense of what I was seeing. It was enough. Before light next day, when all was quiet, I summoned a smithy to one of the makeshift workshops. To allay my remaining doubts, I bid him work one of the changed starstones in ways that only the most precious of all metals can be. Despite the man's protests, the stone was easily cut and beaten into twenty fat coin-like discs of roughly equal size. They are warm to the touch as I hold them now, and feel smooth upon the tongue, creamy yet with a faintly salty flavor; much as I imagine those who indulge such matters find the flesh of a loved one. Gold truly is the most human of metals, yet it also brings us closest to the gods. As for the smithy, I have had him beaten on the pretext of some minor offense. If he survives, his tale will be taken as mere raving.

I have less than a quarter of my given time left here at Cul Holman, and I am torn between a desire to return to Rome, and to remain for longer, gathering starstones. This afternoon, beginning my search, I went out to where the further mines are being reestablished, and sought the gullies along which the slave girl Alya had led me. But I could not find any, and I surmise that they were closed up by the great movements of the earth. That would also explain why the wind sounds differently now—although it blows as hot and fierce as ever. Gone is the weird piping; gone, too, I imagine, are those vast ruins to which Alya took me—or so buried as to be lost forever. For it became apparent as I wandered deeper into these hills that the greatest disturbance took place in the far reaches. If there truly are such things as Virgil's sleeping giants, it is there that the greatest of them all must lie.

Long have I neglected these writings, and now that I begin again, it is upon a proper roll of papyrus, with better ink, and in a better place. Indeed, I have often toyed with the idea of destroying all that I have written, in view of the hazard it would present were it to fall into greedier hands.

You find me where all of this began; which was not Rome or even Cul Holman, it now seems to me, but at my beloved villa in Naples. Of course, I still think of Cul Holman. Yet the place seems darker than it does even within the wilder ramblings of my writings, and its memory tugs me in strange and uncomfortable ways.

Much of the remaining time since I deserted you there, patient reader, I spent in the pursuit of starstones. I confess I remained aloof from the harsh duties of reviving Cul Holman's fortunes. I kept myself to myself, and ate and walked alone, and glanced but occasionally over my shoulder at the black figure that even here still sometimes seems to follow me. But at the end of it all, I found nothing—not one more stone. Any that remained must have been buried in the sliding and twisting of those hills.

Apart from this seemingly odd pursuit, I did nothing to arouse suspicion at Cul Holman, and changed no more of the stones to their true metal. Nor, save in one instance, did I use them for currency; the idea for which seemed to stay with me oddly. For I confess I went to Kaliphus's palace to purchase the freedom of Alya's family. Kaliphus was his usual self, inquiring about Cul Holman's fate in the earthquake as if his spies had not already informed him. Still, he seemed almost reluctant to accept the excessive amount of gold I offered for the freedom of his slaves—though I had credited him as a man of business, if little else.

Eventually, even as he made the sign I had seen him make before, he took the six heavy discs I offered. And he accepted my explanation that they were but a little of the personal wealth I had brought with me from Rome. In fact, there was an odd gravity about our transaction, as if the exchange were necessary as one small notation in a complex scroll of accounts where some greater total was to be balanced.

As is the way with such arrangements, I left Cul Holman and began my long return journey down the Nile aboard the same craft that had borne my successor there. We barely had time to exchange greetings, and still less for me to pass on the little I have learned about mining for gold. Konchab and Taracus will soon also go to other duties—even Alathn, if he is wise, will seek a re-posting before he runs the fatal risk of becoming indispensable. The slaves and freemen, of course, will come and go. They live, they die, they breed. Soon, all that happened at Cul Holman in my time there will be but a rumor.

The great papyrus raft that bore me upon the spring flood of the Nile was readied to depart in the blue of evening. Henrika had come with me upon this journey—sadly, he paled and died soon after of a fever—but otherwise I traveled alone. I felt a curious calm as I watched my trunks and belongings being hauled onto the shadowed deck. I had made no attempt to hide my collection of unchanged starstones, and the gold was bound as a thick weight around my chest and belly beneath the folds of my toga. I would also have carried the black-faceted stone upon me, were

it not that it caused my flesh to burn and ache. The workmen and mariners seemed mere shadows to me. I felt sure that I was protected.

We pulled out into the black waters as the stars began to shine, and a cool wind, so unlike that which I had long become used to, began to fill the vast red sail. All about me, glowing in the light of a huge rising moon, lay the plains and hills and pillared ruins of upper Egypt, and beyond that the beckoning edge of the desert, and the sense that pervades everything there that the present is but the trembling surface from which the currents of the bottomless past will always rise. I stayed on deck as the ropes wheezed and the sail crackled stiffly and we moved further into the smooth flow in which the whole world seemed upturned in reflection. The air was filled with a strange wailing, and when I looked to the shore, I saw that many of the dark-robed natives had gathered in lines and were making this wavering cry at the passage of my boat. And beyond the palm trees and the villages and the fresh-flooded ditches, where moon and starlight silvered the last edges of the hills before they faded into the desert, I thought I saw also a cluster of other figures. It seemed to me that they were mounted, leading those strange humped creatures called camels, and that they raised their arms in salute before turning toward the desert. Thus, so I imagine, I saw the passing of Alya, Dahib, and her tribe.

I broke my journey as before at Alexandria whilst passage to Ostia was arranged, and wandered the same streets. Despite the turn in my fortunes, I was curious to renew my brief acquaintance with the alchemist or charlatan known as Zosimus, for it seemed to me now that the walls of his dark room had been adorned with similar shapes and figures to those I had seen elsewhere. But my pursuit along the odd twists and turns of those shadowed and stinking alleys was fruitless, and I was ever afraid, as I looked behind me, that I was being pursued by some bandit. I also sought enlightenment in the moldering library; for it seemed that I recalled a glimpse of star-shapes and strange drawings on forgotten scrolls. There again, I was disappointed—if disappointment is the right word.

Here in my Naples villa, much work has been done in daylight, although time is wasted by the laborers' refusal to dwell here, and I find it hard, even at inflated prices, to obtain and keep any decent quality of slave. Rumor of my wealth, of course, has spread as quickly as these things always do, and now I fear that I am probably the dupe of shoddy dealings. In view of my father's penury, the gossip is that I returned from the far reaches of Empire with a cache of hidden gold, and the story is near enough the truth for it to be fruitless for me to attempt to deny it. There is also a malicious whisper that I stole gold from the mines I was supervising, and I have had to endure a visit from the Emperor's auditors on the strength of it, although there was hardly any charge worth an-

swering. Still, some shadow seems to hang over me, and I have found it harder than I might have imagined to clear my family's name.

Even with the starstones, all is not quite as I had hoped. Although I regretted that I had not found more than the twenty-three I had with me, I had calculated that they would represent a wealth which is more than the equivalent of Cul Holman's produce in a whole year. It was with the joy of a pleasant task long delayed that, at last alone in the privacy of my father's old quarters, I set about transforming them all to gold. All went well to begin with, until I set to work on what would have been in total the tenth starstone. When the black-faceted stone would not even fit the indentation, I imagined some fault in the mechanism and moved onto the next. Yet I tried them all, and in each case it was the same. Thus, I must make do with a total of merely nine golden starstones, more than four of which I have already been forced to exhaust in repaying my father's debts, of which I fear, much like the cracks and strange defects that the builders find here, there are still more to be uncovered. Of course, I would have readily accepted such an outcome when I first set out toward Egypt—by most normal standards I am wealthy—but the feeling remains at the back of my mind that I have somehow been cheated in a bargain I never intended to make.

At first, I made a great show of new riches to my neighbors, patrons, and acquaintances at great feasts at my refurbished high house in Rome. But I found poorer solace in their company than I had even in that of Alathn, Konchab, Taracus, and even Kaliphus. Often, I would gaze down the table at the odd geometries of plates and arms and bodies, breathing the jagged scent of all the food and the flowers that I had ordered, and wonder at the meaningless drone of their voices, and if this truly was eloquence, elegance, civilization.

Here in Naples after the first work on this villa had been done, I summoned my sister and a fair scattering of other guests, including men whom I deemed would make eager suitors now that our family's wealth was no longer in doubt. In truth, though, when I saw her face, sad and long and flat, it seemed to me that the poor creature had grown more sullen than ever. The occasion went as all the others had done, which is to say pointlessly and expensively, as I lay at table and watched the people move and unfold like shadows and tried to catch the buzzing of their words. Like the other occasions, I knew that it would end early, with poor excuses, uneasy laughter, glances back from my departing guests. My sister, almost as bored with it all as I was, must have wandered off between one of the many courses, for suddenly the air from the unimproved passages beyond this villa's newly lighted hall was torn by a blood-chilling shriek. To this day, I do not know what she imagined she saw upon the dais where my father had once sat, and it seems unlikely, in the gibbering incontinent state in which I found her and that to this day she re-

mains in, that she will ever be able to explain what fancy has riven her mind. She dwells now in a place where, if you pay enough, her kind are looked after. There, she is changed and fed like an infant, and her hands are kept bound and bandaged to thwart the attempts she has made to take out her eyes.

Still, I am proud of the way that work has proceeded at this villa, even if it seems I am to be the last in my family's line unless I take the step of adopting an heir. In the daytime, when the sun is brightest and there is less need for the lamps that I otherwise keep about me, I welcome the sounds and sights of people working, even if the refurbishing of this villa has been a matter of much argument and debate.

These last few days, in fact, following a protracted argument between myself and a foreman about a new window, all work has ceased. It was plain to me that his joinery was out of true, and that whole aspects of the room were finished shoddily at odd degrees. The man and his assistants still had the temerity to claim that all was as it should be; he even produced a rule and set it against the wood and plaster to prove his point, although the thing was clearly as crooked as he was. Thus, and with all my slaves and servants recently gone, I find myself alone.

Naples itself and this coast and countryside have declined in the time since my childhood. An ominous black pall hangs over Vesuvius. The air often stinks. The markets are full of cheap goods and sour produce; once fine streets have become rows of hovels and the harbor reeks of dead fish. I sometimes fear that all our Empire may be declining. There are risings of peasants and shepherds in Gaul, usurpations in Britain, German invasions along the Danube and Rhine. There is even talk that Rome may one day cease to be the capital of our Empire—although, despite the strange things I have heard of and seen, that is one outcome I will never believe.

Alone as I find myself in this villa with you, my reader, my last and trusted friend, it might be imagined that I am prey to robbers. Yet only two nights ago, after the leaving of my last few servants, a body was found not far away in the woods. It belonged to a notorious thief, and was roughly beheaded and coated in a foul slime. So it seems to me, my reader, that in some way, I am still protected, although as I wander the deep lanes whilst Vesuvius growls and rumbles and black flakes of its soot drift like snow upon the air, the people shun me and call in their children at my approach, and close the shutters of their homes.

It is near now to the height of another summer. I go out but little anyway, as the lanes are intolerably filled with the sharp stench of strawberries. In truth, now that I could afford to eat and drink whatever trifles I please to, I find that my taste in food has become bland. My previous cook, before he left, made me many loaves of unrisen cornbread which, stale though they are, I had been eating, and, since they ran out,

have made do with the dough he left uncooked in his hurry to leave. Even on such poor rations, I fear that I may be gaining some of my father's girth.

Each night, I light as many lanterns as I can—and try to restrain myself from drinking their oil. In the few times that sleep comes upon me, I wish that it had not, for I find myself within the presence of the thing that was once my grandmother again, although it seems to me now that she was always thus—a black assortment of angles—and that the things of which she speaks in that buzzing voice are all that she has ever told me. For I know now, although I would give much of my gold not to, of Nyarlathotep, of Great Cthulhu, and Shub-Niggurath, the black goat of the woods—of beings beyond all darkness.

Last night, I tried to break the spell by speaking back to her.

"What do you want?" I asked—then added a half-remembered phrase that came back to me. "Are you the Golden Keeper?"

She chuckled at that, and the sound thinned and faded into a thousand echoes. "What I keep is not gold. And it is not my task to keep it."

"What can I do?"

"Nothing."

"There must be something—"

"—I give that you may give," she says before her voice trails off into inhuman buzzing. Then she lifts something from within the twisting folds of her robes, although it takes a long time for it to emerge, and her arms are like the tearing and stretching of something ancient and rotten. But I recognize it when she holds it out for me. For the thing is black. Multifaceted.

"Here," she says, and, although the stone is already mine, I reach out to take it.

It shifts within my hand as it begins—segment on unfolding segment, as if from the workings of a hidden mechanism—to open. Something smooth and living slides out from it across my fingers. A shining worm of sorts, mucus-coated and somehow larger than the stone within which it was contained. It is truly ghastly to look at, and I watch in horror as it begins to burrow into my hand.

I opened my eyes then, and the room was filled with a sound that I imagined for a moment was nothing more than my own screaming. I stumbled out from my bed, drawn and repulsed by a mad endless piping as Odysseus must once have been by the sirens who lured sailors to the rocks on these very shores. I stumbled naked along dark swirling corridors, no longer knowing what I was escaping or seeking, until I found myself standing out in the well courtyard beneath a sky lit and blackened by Vesuvius's fitful glow. It seemed to me that the piping here was strong enough to burst my ears, and that I knew at once where it came from. Still possessed by the logic of a dream, I drew back the grating of the well.

Perhaps I truly was dreaming, for there can be no rational meaning to what I saw when I looked down. For a moment, the well seemed truly bottomless, filled with stars. Then there came a liquid click, and a sense of something rising. If I could describe the thing at all, I would say that it was made of bubbling, shifting matter. As to its true shape, it had none—or many; for as it rose toward me with impossible speed, piping and shrieking, I imagined that it re-made itself into a mockery of many forms. I saw dog-headed Anubis, I saw Medusa, bearded Jove, a horned bull, and the livid, bloated face of my father. Then, I stumbled back, swooning in the terrible blast of air. And I remained that way for much of night, crouched shivering by the well as Vesuvius smoked and shook and glowing flakes of ash burned at my flesh, almost urging the thing that I had glimpsed to finish its ascent. Yet nothing happened, and as dawn grew, the piping slowly faded.

I am no longer sure what happened last night; and how much of what I saw was due to some fevered condition, or the effects of sleepwalking. This day, since I could summon no workmen to do the task for me, I have busied myself with laying the grate back over the well, and weighing it down with stone blocks and what pieces of furniture I could manage to drag unaided into the courtyard. It was harsh work, made more difficult by the problems I found in negotiating their shapes around the incredibly odd angles and openings of corridors and doors.

As I look out now, near to sunset as Vesuvius rumbles threateningly and brings early darkness across half the sky, it seems to me that the familiar and beloved landscape of my childhood memories formed by the intersections of sea and hills shifts and breaks like panes of ice upon a lake. But for the fact that they were moving, I would take the figures I can see crossing a distant field to be the limbs of twisted, blackened trees. And earlier, as I rested from the task of dragging a large and recently purchased mirror out into the well courtyard, I saw another odd effect. Leaning against the wall for support as the corridor ahead of me seemed to twist downward, I looked at myself in the polished brass. The mirror's inner surface flared out, and my face, admittedly broader and paler now, became not so much that of my father, as of that terrible distortion of him which I saw coming up from the well. And then began the maddening piping that has been with me ever since.

Now that the sun has set on this dense and windless night, and with the mouth of the well surely covered by enough weight to muffle any sound, the piping grows louder still. Entwined within it is the muttering of some mad incantation that I recognize now comes from my own throat. I hear it speak of the Great Gate of the Stars, and of the living seed that is and always was the Golden Keeper.

The shrieking now is incredibly loud—triumphant, even, as the ground shakes beneath me and the walls begin to shift. Perhaps, after all the

years of threats and mutterings since the time of Herculaneum and Pompeii, Vesuvius is preparing to erupt. No doubt, if that is all this is, the women will be wailing, offering the blood of lambs on the hot smoking slopes above their dwellings. But to me, it all seems far closer than that. Closer even than the well or even the sliding walls of this room. I feel a stronger presence, as if the very ground beneath me were about to crack.

My head swirls so much with this chaos, dearest reader, that I fear you and I must soon part, for I can barely write these words. Stopping my ears does nothing but increase the terrible sound, this sense of something within me rising. I would also bind my eyes, were it not for what I see in the greater dark, which is now so vivid that I can scarcely bear to blink. I would but speak to you now, reader, but each breath is agony, and with the parting of my lips the piping grows yet wilder and guttural words spill out. I tried to call upon Vesta, protector of households, that strong and humble symbol of goodness and light. But the sound came out as mad shrieking, and I could barely close my jaw as my chin was jerked back and my throat widened on a stream of darkness and foul air. Even now, with my chin tightly bound and my mouth filled with the gold discs and papyrus that are all I now have about me, the sound grows in power.

I will wait for what this night brings me, and distract myself meanwhile by ordering these scraps of my writing before they are spoiled by the dark fluid that now bubbles from my lips. Perhaps my father was right, and I will never understand the meaning of the rituals I have been performing, nor yet the purpose of the Golden Keeper. Perhaps our lives really are without purpose. But, in that, at least, I fear that I may yet prove him wrong. Meanwhile go in peace, reader, and know that I am Fabius Lucius Maximus, a trained accountant of high Roman blood who has done service to the Empire in both Egypt and Sicily. Truly, I am a murderer also, and I fear that I have treated many of those I came across harshly. But all I ever wished for was decency and comfort. I trust that, after all we have shared, you will understand all of this, gentle reader, and strive not to condemn me. ●

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Kage Baker

FACTS RELATING TO THE ARREST OF DR. KALUGIN



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All of the mortals referred to in Kage Baker's latest Company story (her first, "Noble Mold," appeared in our March 1997 issue), actually lived and worked in the last century at Fort Ross—Russia's failed colony just north of San Francisco. "A Vasilii Kalugin was, in fact, stationed at the fort during the time mentioned in this story. The orchard and the fortress are still there, and well worth a visit; the ghosts are pleasant and courteous, and the holy water still flows free." Ms. Baker's first novel, *In the Garden of Eden, a Novel of the Company*, will be out from Harcourt Brace in February.

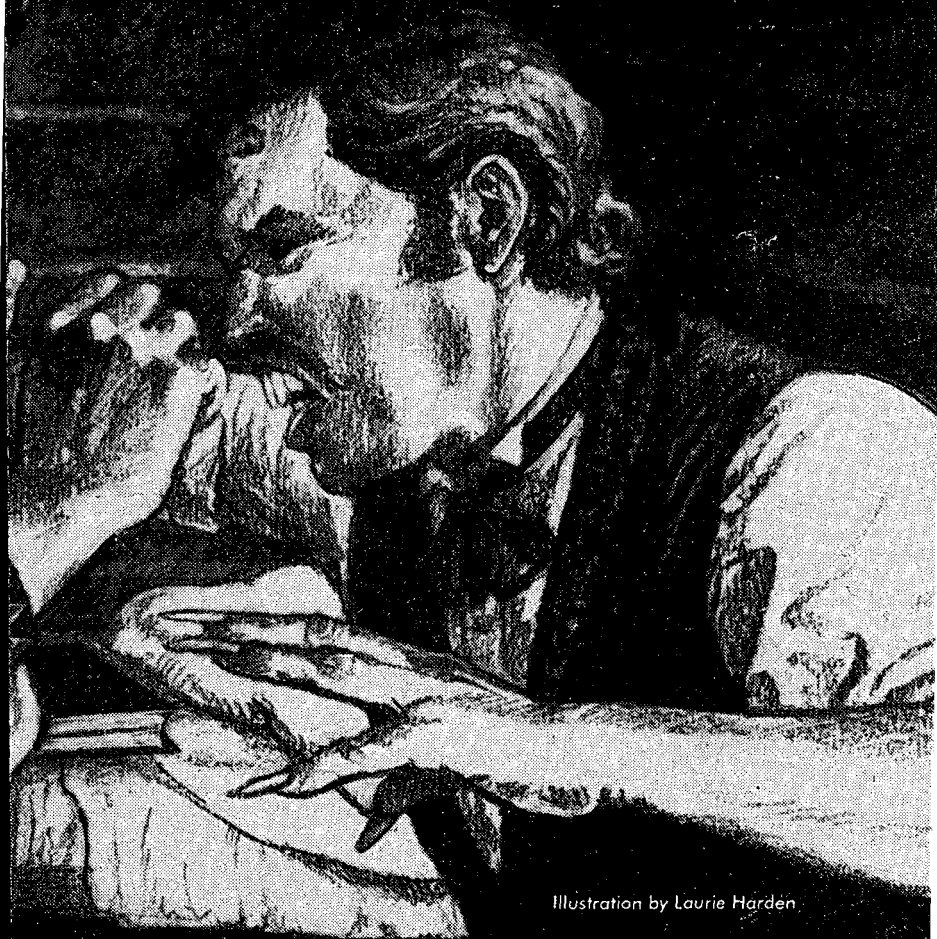


Illustration by Laurie Harden

... One of the lasting enigmas in the history of the Ross settlement is that of Vasilii Kalugin, the medical officer or feldsher for the colonists. We know nothing of his origins prior to his arrival at Ross in 1831, although it can be guessed that he had some familiarity with botany as well as his obvious medical training . . . nor is much known of the circumstances surrounding his arrest within two months after his arrival at the settlement, and still less concerning his apparent pardon and reinstatement. . . . Finally, his disappearance from the historical record after 1835 . . . presents certain problems in light of documents recently discovered in the Sitka archives. . . .

—Badenov's *Russian Expansion in the North Pacific*,
Harper/Fantod, 2089

Oh, dear, that old tale. I'd prefer not to discuss that, if you don't mind. No, really, you'd have nightmares. No? Well, you're an exceptional Immortal, I must say, if you don't. I'm sure the rest of us do. Very well then; the night and the storm will provide atmosphere, and we can't go anywhere until dawn anyway. Shall I tell you what really happened, that night in 1831? Have another glass of tea and poke up the fire. No sneering now, please. This is a true story. Unfortunately.

I was working for two Companies at once, you see. It so happened that my job with Dr. Zeus Inc. required me to assume a mortal identity and join the Russian-American Company, posing as a medico sent out to take care of the settlers in the Californian colony. The real job involved some clandestine salvage operations not far offshore, but they don't enter into this story.

I'd worked hard to prepare a mortal identity, too, I mean besides graying my hair. I had all manner of anecdotes about having been a surgeon in the Imperial Navy and patched up battle wounds. I thought that's what they'd need in California: someone to stitch up grizzly bear bites and slashes from knife brawls. But no sooner had I arrived in Sitka than I was summoned to Baron Von Wrangel's office and informed that I was to be a botanist, if you please! Oh, and a surgeon, too, but when I wasn't amputating limbs I was to spend my every spare moment collecting any local plants with curative powers, interviewing the natives if necessary.

Difficult man, Baron Von Wrangel. A man of science, to be sure, and limitless enthusiasm for exploration and study; but you wouldn't want to work for him. And I wasn't programmed for botany, you see! I'm scarcely able to tell a beet from a cabbage. I've been a Marine Operations Specialist for six centuries now.

Well, before I left Sitka I transmitted a requisition to the Company—our Company—for an access code on the healing plants of the Nova Albion region. I'd just received a confirmation on my request when the *Bul-*

dakov weighed anchor and left Alaska, so off I went to California in fond hopes the access code would catch up with me there.

You've heard of the Ross colony, the Russian outpost north of San Francisco? It was supposed to grow produce to support Russia's Alaskan colonies and turn a tidy profit for the Russian-American Company into the bargain. It lost money, as a matter of fact; but what a charming failure it was! On a headland above the blue Pacific, with beautiful golden mountains sloping up behind it and great dark groves of red pine trees along the skyline, and such a blue sky! Compared to Okhotsk it was a fairy tale of eternal summer.

The stockade there was faced with the biggest planks I'd ever seen, enormous those red trees were, but the gates stood open most of the time. Why? Because there was no danger from the local savages. Despite my use of the term they were no fools, politically or otherwise, and they knew that our presence there protected them from the depredations of the Spanish. Therefore, the local chieftains signed a treaty with us; and you may say what you like about my countrymen, but as far as I know the Russians are the only nation ever to keep a treaty with Native Americans.

So it was a calm place, Ross, and I could sit calmly in the orchard outside the stockade. There I liked to work on my laptop credenza (resembling a calfskin volume of Schiller's poems), and if a naked Indian ambled past with his fishing spear over his shoulder we'd merely wave at each other. On the day the Courier came I had been idling there all morning, typing up my daily report in a desultory way and watching the russet leaves drift down.

"Vasilii Vasilievich!" someone roared, and looking up I beheld Iakov Babin striding through the trees. He was one of the colonists, a peasant who'd worked as a trapper for a time, settled down now with an Indian wife. A tough fellow with a nasty reputation, too, and he looked the part: stocky and muscular, with a wild flowing beard and ferocious tufted eyebrows, and a fixed glare that would have given Ivan the Terrible pause.

"Hey, Vasilii Vasilievich!" he repeated, spurning windfall apples out of his way like so many severed heads as he advanced. I closed my laptop.

"Good afternoon, Babin. How is your wife? Did the salve help?"

"I wouldn't know, Doc, I ain't been home yet. I just come back from the Presidio." He meant the handful of mud huts that would one day be San Francisco. "Jumped off the boat and been five hours on the trail." He loomed over me and fixed both thumbs in his belt. "You know an Englishman by the name of *Currier*?"

"Currier?" I scanned my memory. "I don't believe so, no. Why?"

"Maybe he's a Yankee. I couldn't tell what the polecat was, nohow, but he comes on board the *Polifem* at Yerba Buena and says he's looking for Dr. Vasilii Kalugin, which is you. Says he's from some Greek doctor. You ain't sick, are you, Doc?"

"No, certainly not!"

"No, me and the boys reckoned it was pretty unlikely you'd caught something from a whore!" His hard eyes glinted with momentary good humor, and I was uncomfortably aware of the contempt in which he held me. It wasn't personal: but I could read and write and wore clothes made in St. Petersburg, which made me a trifle limp in the wrist as far as he was concerned. "So anyway, he's on his way here now. I got to warn you, Doc, watch out for him."

"Currier," I mused aloud. Then I remembered my requisition. Of course! He must be the *courier* Dr. Zeus was sending with my access code. I improvised: "You know, I do have a maiden aunt in Minsk who put me in her will. Perhaps she's died. Perhaps that's what he's here about. Not to worry, Babin."

Iakov Dmitrivich shook his bushy head. "He ain't from Minsk, Doc. More likely from Hell! Me and the boys about figured he's a *dybbuk*."

"Why on earth would you say that?" I frowned. Mortals who can detect the presence of cyborgs are rare, and in any case we're all trained in a thousand little deceptions to avoid notice.

"He ain't right somehow," Babin actually shivered. "The Indians noticed first, and they wouldn't go near him, though he was real friendly when he come on board. But when we had to sit at anchor a couple days, 'cause the captain took his time about leaving, well, he took on about it like a woman! Sat in his cabin and cried! Brighted up some when we finally lifted anchor, but the longer we were on board the crazier he acted. By the time we finally dropped anchor in Port Rumiantsev we was damn glad to be rid of him, I tell you."

"Dear me." I was at a loss. "Well, thank you, Babin. I'll watch out for the fellow. Though if he's bringing me a legacy I don't suppose I'll care whether he's a *dybbuk* or not, eh?"

Babin snorted at my feeble attempt at humor. "Just you watch him, Doc," he muttered, and departed for the stockade.

I signed off on my laptop and stood, brushing away leaves. Wandering out from the orchard, I looked up at the hills where the trail from Port Rumiantsev came down. Yes, there he was! A pale figure striding along, really rather faster than a mortal would go. Gracious, why hadn't he taken a horse? I squinted my eyes, focusing long-range.

He looked pale because he was wearing a suit of fawn linen, absurd at this season of the year, and tall buff suede boots. The whole cut of his clothing was indeed English; though he had somehow acquired one of our Russian conical fur hats and wore it jauntily on the back of his head. He was bounding down the trail with a traveling-bag slung over his shoulder, looking all about him with an expression of such fascinated delight one felt certain he was about to miss a step and come tumbling down the steep incline. Had he been a mortal he certainly must have fallen.

I thrust my laptop in a coat pocket and transmitted: *Quo Vadis?*

Huh? He turned his head sharply in my direction.

Are you the courier?

That's me! Are you Kalugin? He was speaking Cinema Standard.

Yes.

Hey, that's great! I've got an access code for you from Botanist Mendoza!

Whyn't you walk up to the road to meet me?

Very well.

He vanished into the great pine trees that grew along the stream and I trudged across the fields, sinking ankle-deep in frequent gopher holes. Long before I was able to reach the trees, he emerged from their green gloom and walked briskly to meet me, with his shadow stretching away across the fields behind him.

"Marine Operations Kalugin?" Grinning, he grabbed my hand and shook it heartily. It was a wide grin, he had a wide square jaw with a wide full mouth whose front teeth were slightly gapped. I remember that he had a deep dimple in his chin and greenish eyes. His color was ruddy, his hair thick and curling. None of us look old—unless we age ourselves cosmetically—but he looked astonishingly young.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you. You wouldn't believe the trouble I had getting up here," he told me. I concluded that, despite his youthful appearance, he must be one of the truly old operatives. Have you ever noticed that the older ones tend to fall back principally on Cinema Standard when mortals aren't present? I've noticed it, anyway. I suppose they do it because perhaps there wasn't any complex human language back in Paleolithic times when they were made, and so Cinema Standard became the first real language they ever learned—their mother tongue, so to speak.

"Wouldn't they loan you a horse at Port Rumiantsev?" I inquired. He widened his eyes in amazement.

"Were there horses for rent there? Gosh, nobody told me. Hey, that Rumiantsev place, that's Bodega Bay, isn't it? Isn't Hitchcock gonna film *The Birds* set there?"

"Some scenes, yes." I smiled. "Tippi Hedren is first attacked in that harbor. Are you a cinema enthusiast?"

"Well, sure! And, boy, do things look different there now!" He giggled slightly, I suppose aware of the banality of his remark, and swung his bag down from his shoulder. "Well, I guess I'd better give you that access code."

From a narrow compartment he drew out an envelope, neatly addressed to me in Russian using Roman letters. "It's in there." He handed it to me.

"Wonderful." I tore the envelope open and peered inside. Wrapped in a thin sheet of notepaper was the filmy strip of code. I closed it up again carefully and tucked it deep in my pocket.

"And the lady said to tell you—" his voice and face abruptly altered and I was hearing a woman's voice, speaking smooth Cinema Standard with

just the faintest steel of Old Spain: "This study was compiled in 1722 and while I don't *think* any of the species described here have gone extinct since then, he should check with the local Indians. However, I'm quite sure he'll find it comprehensive enough for his needs."

His face resumed its normal appearance and I applauded. "How marvelous! Is that a special subroutine for couriers?"

He looked confused. "*I'm the Courier*," he said.

"Yes, but—" There was an awkward pause while I tried to fathom what he meant, during which I became aware that a few of the settlers had come out of their huts and were staring at us. The Courier lifted his bag again, shifting from foot to foot.

"Anyway. There's your letter. What are my orders?" he asked me.

"Orders?" I stared at him. "I have no orders for you."

His face went perfectly blank, a greater transformation than the moment previous; no more expression than a wax mannequin.

"You haven't got any orders for me?" he repeated wonderingly. "'But you have to. Where am I supposed to go next?'"

"I don't know, Mr.—er, dear me, you haven't told me your name—"

"Courier," he informed me. Strange; but our etiquette, as you know, frowns on remarking upon a fellow cyborg's personal appellation, so I blundered on:

"Courier. My dear sir, I'm afraid I haven't received any transmissions from Base since I've been here. Clearly there's been some mistake. I'm sure they'll send your orders any day now."

"But what am I supposed to *do*?" His knuckles whitened on the handle of his bag.

"Well—" I looked around uncomfortably. I could understand if he were irritated, but his flat incomprehension baffled me. "Perhaps you'd like to visit the colony here?"

Instantly his face cleared. "Okay!" he said cheerfully. I glanced over at the little crowd of Indians and frontiersmen beginning to gather by the stockade.

"We need to address the question of your cover identity, however. Your choice of clothing is a little unusual for a Russian," I explained delicately. "Are you programmed to speak our language, at all?"

"Sure!" he affirmed. In a flat Kievan accent he inquired: "Say, Comrade, what time does the boat leave? Where can I catch the diligence for Moscow? Is this the road to the Volga ferry?"

"Very well . . . er . . . we'll say you're my late aunt's lawyer's clerk, and you've come all this way to deliver this important letter with news of her demise. You've also brought papers I must review and sign concerning her estate, so I've asked you to be my guest for a day or so."

"Got it." He made a circle with his index finger and thumb. "I'm a clerk. So, let's go! Show me around the place."

* * *

He surveyed the view in evident enjoyment as we crossed the headland toward the stockade. Everything pleased him: our villainous-looking Aleuts scraping a sea lion skin, the windmill turning on its low eminence, a field of pumpkins blazing red like harvest moons amid withering vines. "Hey, neat!" He elbowed me, pointing at them. "I guess in a couple of days you'll have some swell jack-o'-lanterns, huh?"

"If these people had ever heard of Halloween, certainly," I replied. "You must remember, Courier, this is Russian America. And 1831."

"Oh." He looked momentarily confused. "Sure it is. Sorry, I forgot." He glanced down into the cove, where the stream flowed into the sea. "Gosh! What's that down there? Say, is that a shipyard?" He ran to the edge of the bluff to look. "I don't see any ships. Just some kayaks."

"Bidarkas," I corrected him. "We used to build ships. They fell apart. And our wheat gets Wheat Rust due to the winter fogs, and our Aleut hunters have nothing much to do because the sea otters they were brought here to hunt had unfortunately been hunted nearly to extinction by the time this settlement was founded." I shrugged apologetically. "We don't seem to be able to accomplish much here."

"I guess not." He gazed around. "But it's so *beautiful*."

I felt a glow of friendship toward him. "Exactly, Courier! Look about you. No one is hungry here, because we do manage to raise enough to feed ourselves. Everyone is working together in peace, regardless of race. The climate is mild. Could you ask for a better description of Paradise? If only we weren't supposed to be making a profit!"

But he wasn't listening to me. He was hastening ahead to look at the cemetery.

"I have to see Everything," he shouted over his shoulder.

He was quite serious. He wanted to have the colony explained to him, from the gopher holes and plough-scored rocks to the flag atop the mast in the stockade. Then he wanted to meet everyone. Everyone, I say: he even reached through the bars in the jail to shake hands with poor little Fedor Svinin, the ex-clerk who had embezzled ten years' worth of salary to cover his gambling debts. "You don't say? Poor old guy!" He would have pumped hands with equal enthusiasm with Kostromitinov, the general manager, had Piotr Stepanovich not been visiting our farm at the river. That was all right: he shook hands with all the local Kashayas he could find, who stared at him in mute incomprehension; he shook hands with every one of our Aleuts, who smiled politely and then wiped their hands on their sealskin shirts. Courier didn't notice; he didn't hold still long enough, leaping away to exclaim over some new feature of the settlement he'd just noticed. Everyone, everything enchanted him.

And really it was delightful, if a bit exhausting, to accompany someone who took such intense pleasure in the smallest details of mundane life.

One saw through his eyes and the great trees looked bigger, the Indians more mysterious, the coastline more wild and romantic.

Though I must say I seem to have been the only one who enjoyed his company; Babin had already been talking to the other Russians about my mysterious visitor, and the ones who weren't superstitious drew their own smirking conclusions about this effusive pretty boy. So much for my ever earning their respect.

Courier even approached Babin with his hand out, crying "Pleased to meet you, sir, my name's Courier," before Babin stepped back indignant-ly.

"By the Black Goat hisself!" he spat. "As if I'd want to touch the likes of him, after the way he cut up on the *Polifem*!"

Courier lowered his hand, looking hurt and bewildered, as Babin turned and stamped off. "What's wrong with *him*?" he asked me.

"He, er, formed rather a poor opinion of you, I'm afraid. Apparently. When you were fellow passengers on the *Polifem*," I explained. "There seems to have been some unfortunate incident—?"

"There was?" Courier stared after Babin. "Oh. I guess I didn't recognize him, huh?"

No amount of hinting could prompt him to tell me just what had happened on board the *Polifem*, but I thought perhaps he needed a little more briefing on Russian customs before he'd fit in at the officers' table; so when time came for the evening meal I arranged for two plates of venison stew and we carried them to one of the rooms kept ready for visitors. Courier took his tin dish and clambered onto his bunk with it, settling his back against the wall. He sighed in contentment.

"Look at this! This is real frontier living. Look at these bare timber walls. Look at that old oil lamp—it's burning seal blubber, isn't it? And this is a real wool trade blanket I'll be sleeping under tonight! Gosh. What an experience." He spooned up a mouthful of stew and chewed ecstatically. "Mm-mm! So this is venison, huh? Kind of like beef, isn't it?"

"You mean you've never tasted venison before?" I stopped eating in surprise.

"Not that I know of." He swallowed and washed it down with a big gulp of kvass. "Golly, that's good! Never had that before, either."

"Now that I can believe." I smiled. "I take it, then, you've been primarily posted to cities during your career?"

"Well, sure." He put another spoonful in his mouth.

"Where have you been?"

"Oh, here and there. You know." He waved his spoon vaguely. It occurred to me that he might not be at liberty to reveal previous assignments, and therefore it would be good manners to refrain from further questions. I gave an impromptu talk on Russian manners and mores during the rest of our meal, occasionally interrupted as he noticed yet more

picturesque things to exult about, like the tin reflector behind the lamp or the framed print of the Tsar.

When we had dined I took our tableware and made to leave him for the night, but a sudden anxious look came into his eyes and he stopped me.

"My orders," he said. "Have you got them?"

"Why—no," I told him. "Here. Wait, I'll see if any transmissions have come in yet, shall I? Though I haven't heard the signal—" I put down the dishes and took out my laptop. "No . . . no, not a word. See? I'm sorry."

"But why haven't they sent my orders?" He fidgeted.

"I haven't the slightest idea, my friend. I can transmit an inquiry for you, but we may not get a reply for hours, or even days."

"That's all right, you send it. I know my orders will come." He nodded his head confidently. So I typed in the inquiry, and as I'd suspected the green letters just sat there and glowed. But Courier seemed to have been comforted, and so I bid him good night.

On my way to the kitchen, a figure loomed into view, blocking the corridor, and my heart sank. It was Kostromitinov, the manager. He did not look pleased with me.

"Kalugin!" he intoned. Oh, dear; he hadn't even taken off his riding boots. "We have a guest, it seems, Vasilii Vasilievich? A stranger? And in my absence you've given him a complete tour of the colony, fortifications and all? Let him count every one of our cannons, I suppose?"

"It's not like that at all, sir," I protested. He was backing me up against the wall. "He's simply a messenger, and I was obliged to offer him hospitality."

"Did that mean you had to show him the armory, you idiot?"

"Sir, you don't understand." I let my lip tremble. "He brought a letter from home. There's, er, been a terrible tragedy in my family—my dear aunt, my sainted mother's only sister—she raised me from infancy—she—she—" a tear rolled down my cheek.

"She's died, I suppose?" He took a step back.

"She was run over by a pie wagon!" I broke down and sobbed. Well, it was the first thing that came into my head. Kostromitinov exhaled and folded his arms.

"All right. All right. My condolences. But, Kalugin! This may seem an idle sleepy place, but do I have to remind you that we are on disputed soil? And you know nothing about this Englishman, do you, really? What if he's a spy? What if he murdered your lawyer's clerk and took the letter in order to get an opportunity to study our defenses for his government?"

"He's not an Englishman." I wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "He's from Kiev. He, er, lost his trunk and had to borrow those absurd clothes from a fellow passenger who happened to be English."

"On the *Polifem*?" Kostromitinov raised his eyebrows. "How interesting. I heard nothing about any foreigners on board. Still, who tells me

anything nowadays? Why should *I* receive any directives from the governor?"

"A-actually I believe it was before he left Siberia, Piotr Stepanovich."

"I see. So the unpleasantness on board the *Polifem* had nothing to do with your friend losing his trunk?" Kostromitinov thrust his face close to mine.

"No, it—that is—was there an unpleasantness on board the *Polifem*?" I tried to look surprised. "My goodness, he seems such an affable young man."

"Well, Iakov Babin, who as you may be aware is not exactly a holy saint himself, has formed the lowest of opinions of your friend's character. He told me so personally. Waited up to tell me, in fact, so that the first sight to greet me as I returned from a long day of wrestling with the failing economy of the Slavianska farm was Iakov Dmitrivich's scowling face."

"As God is my witness, Piotr Stepanovich, he's no spy," I sniveled. "And what was I to do, after all, when he'd made such a long journey on my family's behalf? Bar the gates against him? Give him a kopeck and tell him to get out? I will stake my life on it he's nothing but a pleasant fool."

Kostromitinov rolled his eyes. "How should you know? Haven't you ever heard that he who plays the greatest fool often lays the deepest plots?" *Truer than you know*, I thought. "But I suppose there's nothing to be done now, is there? Pull yourself together, Vasilii Vasilievich. Why don't you go to the pantry and brace yourself with a shot of vodka? And can you vouch for this desperate character's behavior after I leave again tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir," I replied weakly, and stumbled past him into the kitchen, where I took his advice and had a shot of vodka. In fact, I took his advice three times.

"Kalugin!" My troubled sleep ended with a jolt. It was pitch black in my room, but an apparition at the foot of my bed glowed by infrared like the fires of Hell. I felt an involuntary desire to cross myself. It was only Courier standing there, after all.

"What is it?"

"Have you got my orders?"

"Dear God, what time is it?" I groaned, and checked my internal chronometer. "Courier, it's four o' clock in the morning!"

"Have you got my orders?" he repeated, louder this time.

"Ssh! Let me see if they've come," I grumbled, sitting up and fumbling for my laptop. I opened it and looked for messages. "No, Courier, I'm sorry. I'll look again later. Why don't you go back to bed, now?"

He opened his mouth as if to say something, sighed loudly instead, and went away.

Of course I failed utterly to go back to sleep after that. I wondered, as I tried to beat comfort into my leaden pillow, whether mortals would envy

us our infinitely prolonged existence if they knew it meant an infinite number of four AMs like this one.

In any case it was a chilled and blear-eyed immortal who ordered hot tea and settled down by the fire in the deserted officers' mess to enjoy it. Need I tell you that my pleasure was short-lived? For here came Courier, with his traveling-bag in his hand, pacing toward me like a dog in search of its master.

"Have you got my orders?" he wanted to know.

"Not yet." I sipped my tea.

"You didn't even look!"

"I'd hear the signal if a message came in," I told him. "However, if it will make you feel better—" I took out the laptop and showed him. After staring at it a moment he sank down on a bench. He looked so miserable it was impossible not to feel sorry for him.

"Would you like any breakfast?" I inquired. "I can order you a bowl of kasha. The cook is awake." He nodded glumly and I went out to fetch it for him. When it arrived he cheered up quite a bit, became pleasant and talkative, praised kasha to the skies for its flavor, its aroma, and its obvious nutritive qualities; but when it was gone he fell silent again, with a queer sullenness to his expression I had not noticed previously. He began to beat out a rhythm on the table with his hands. I finished my tea, drew a deep breath, and volunteered:

"Well, since it seems you'll be my guest a trifle longer than we'd anticipated, would you like to explore the surrounding countryside today? We can borrow a pair of saddle horses from the stables."

Courier's face smoothed out like untroubled water. He jumped to his feet.

"You bet! Let's go!"

We departed the colony while it was still half-asleep, white smoke curling up from its chimneys and Indian day laborers straggling in across its fields from their village nearby. Courier's horse was skittish and uneasy, but I must say he was a superb rider, controlling with an iron hand an animal that clearly wanted to bolt and run. I myself ride like a sack of flour; there were no Cossacks amongst my mortal gene donors, I fear. My mount looked over its shoulder at me in what I fancied was pitying contempt. Horses always know.

Courier seemed quite happy to spur his horse splashing along dark streams, in the deep shadow under enormous trees, exclaiming over their vastness. ("Gosh! This looks like where *The Return of the Jedi* was shot!") Sometimes we'd come down into an open valley and follow a watercourse through willow and alder thickets, near villages where Indians fished for salmon, or we'd skirt wide marshlands where a single egret stood motionless, like a white flame. I played the tour docent and explained as much as I knew of the local natural history, though of course I'd have

done better if I'd had a chance to access Mendoza's codes, but Courier didn't seem to mind. He shouted his rapture at encountering a madrone tree scarlet with berries, or a spray of flame-pink maple leaves backlit by a sunbeam against moss green as emeralds.

As the afternoon lengthened I led us back in a loop to the great coastal ridge, and timed our progress up its leeward side so that we came to the crest just as the sun was setting.

"And we're home again." I gestured at the breathtaking view, rather pleased with myself. Across the gleaming Pacific, the red sun was just descending into a bank of purple fog. Far below us, down beyond countless treetops, the Ross settlement looked like a toy village, with its quaint blockhouses and domed and towered chapel. There were still tiny figures moving in the patchwork fields. Mortal places are so beautiful.

I glanced over at Courier to see if he were appreciating the full effect. No. A moment before, his face had been all bright and animated, gleeful as he urged his mount up toward the crest. Now, however, he drooped visibly.

"We're going back *there*?" he complained.

"Well, of course. It's nearly dark. Wouldn't want to meet with a bear up here, after all, would we?"

"I guess not." He moved restlessly in the saddle. "Have you got my orders?" he demanded. I drew out my laptop at once and checked.

"No, Courier, not yet."

"They'll *never* come," he cried mournfully. I just shrugged and urged my horse on down the trail. After a moment he followed me, sad and silent, and finally caught up as we crossed the road and neared the stockade.

"Maybe we could eat dinner with the other Russian guys here, tonight, instead of just sitting in that dark room?" he asked.

"You mean dine in the officers' mess?" I was nonplussed. "Er—you might find it a little boring." The truth was that I was fairly certain he hadn't paid much attention to my lecture on Russian habits; and as peculiar as he seemed to me, he'd seem even stranger to my fellow officers.

"Oh, no, it'd be neat!" he told me. "Is it anything like that party in *Anna Karenina*? The one with Greta Garbo?"

I paused in my saddle to access and got a mental image of a vodka-swilling Vronsky (as portrayed by Fredric March) crawling under a table. "Good heavens, no! Dear God, if we carried on like that we'd *really* lose money here!" I chuckled.

But he insisted, and so that evening we dined at the long table in the officers' mess. He helped himself to great quantities of salmon, of piroshki and blini and caviar, so I wasn't too surprised when he turned up his nose at the serving of venison stew. He didn't want the kvass again, either, he went straight for the vodka; I was half afraid he'd attempt to reenact the window-ledge scene from *War and Peace*, but he behaved

himself. Perhaps that film wasn't in his internal library. No, he sipped sensibly and stared around him with his usual pleased expression, listening to the amazingly dull mess conversations as though they were fantastic adventure stories.

When the servant had cleared away the plates and small after-dinner cigars had been lit, in strode Iakov Babin. He came frequently for vodka and cigars at our mess, and not merely to enjoy the bachelor atmosphere; rumor had it he was an expert cheat at cards. He glanced over, saw Courier and gave him a fierce glare: then, thank heaven, ignored him as he pulled out a deck and settled down to win inordinate amounts of Company scrip from a junior manager who ought to have known better but didn't want to appear timid. Courier watched in fascination; and when I was momentarily distracted by the clerk who kept the Company store, who buttonholed me to complain about his rheumatism, Courier got up and went over to the card table to have a closer look.

"That looks like fun," he told them hopefully.

"Would you like to join the game?" responded the junior manager, even more hopefully.

"Oh, I don't know how to play," Courier replied, and every head in the room turned toward him. A young man, supposedly a Russian, who didn't play cards in that day and age? *How much more conspicuous could he make himself?*

"Yes, Andrei Andreivich, that does sound serious." I looked over at Courier, wondering what on Earth he was doing. "Er—look here, it sounds to me as though a violent purge is needed. Rid yourself of poisons, you know."

"You've never played *cards*?" the junior manager was gaping at Courier.

"A purge!" Andrei backed away a pace or two. "Do you think that's really necessary, Doctor?"

"You never know. Of course he's played cards, gentlemen, but he's from Kiev, after all; he's never learned Frontier Rules." I moved swiftly to the table and addressed Courier. "You play picquet, I'm sure, and whist, don't you?" *Tell them you play whist, for God's sake!*

Okay. "Yes, I play whist," he agreed.

"Well, shall we have a game, then?" I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Whist!" Iakov Dmitrivich exhaled a cloud of noxious blue smoke and bit down on his cigar viciously. "Well, *I'm* out! That ain't no game for me." He folded his cards and threw them on the table, pausing just long enough to chalk his winnings. The junior manager looked relieved, nevertheless.

"Whist, yes, what a grand idea!" he babbled. "Haven't played in ages! Be a bit of a change, won't it? Shall we, ah . . . shall we wager?" He must have seen foolish-looking Courier as his chance to repair his losses.

"I'm not certain my friend has much money—" I began, but Courier smiled and reached into his coat.

"I've got lots of cash! See?" He emptied his purse on the table. Out jingled a collection of Coins of the World; gold pieces from Chile, American dollars, French francs, British half-crowns, Russian rubles and a mongrel mass of small change.

"Looks fine to me." The junior manager shuffled the deck with slightly shaky hands. "Stiva, will you partner me?" His assistant clerk pulled up another chair and Courier sat down too, and the junior manager dealt the cards.

I transmitted the rules of whist to Courier, who nodded with a shrewd expression and sorted quickly through his hand. We lost the first hand; thereafter he watched the cards keenly, and within a few more hands we began to win, and then win *every time*.

I looked up in horror as I realized what he was doing. You've never used your cyborg abilities to win at cards, and neither would I, of course: but it didn't seem to have occurred to Courier that he'd draw attention to himself by memorizing the positions of the cards, and using his knowledge to win. The chalked figures on the table grew higher and higher as we won more sums in scrip from the junior manager, who sat in a veritable pool of sweat. The room grew unpleasantly silent; Iakov Babin, who had been leaning by the fire regaling a small crowd with bloodcurdling tales of an Indian massacre, left off talking and stared across the room at us with an ironical grin. I met his eyes and he nodded as if to say, *What did I tell you? Dybbuk!*

Courier, for God's sake, what are you doing? Let the mortals win some of the time!

He looked up at me in puzzlement. *But I thought the object of the game was to win.*

Now, it will undoubtedly have dawned on you by this time that there was something wrong with Courier. It had even dawned on me. We aren't made stupid, and yet he was behaving like a perfect ass! And then I had what I thought was a moment of blinding revelation: he was a courier because that was the only job he was *fit* for, running from one place to another with a bag of papers! I looked across at his innocent face and all the old horror stories of early experiments came into my mind, before the Company perfected us, before they had managed to give us immortal *minds* to compare with our immortal bodies. *Was he one such Golem?* Yes, you shiver: imagine how I felt, sitting across the table from him!

"Babin, I declare you've got the Evil Eye!" I tittered. "You've broken our winning streak." And I put down just the wrong card. There was a gasp of relief from the junior manager. Courier started and stared. "But—" he protested.

Enough! There'll be trouble here if you win any more!

Oh. Okay.

"I'm done." I yawned prodigiously. "Gracious, the air's blue in here! Time I went to bed. You'd better turn in too, young man; you'll have a long journey ahead of you once we've got those papers signed."

"Here, now, that's hardly fair," the assistant clerk complained. "We sat out our run of bad luck; you should do the same!"

"He played damned well for somebody who didn't know much about cards," muttered the junior manager. As I sought for the right words to defuse the situation, Courier was scooping up his little bag of coins unconcernedly.

"I'll just take these," he said. "You can have the scrip stuff back; I can't use it anyway." Everyone looked at him, dumfounded.

"Yes, capital idea, all debts canceled!" I cried in false heartiness. "Let's end our evening on a friendly note, shall we?"

The junior manager stared as that sank in and then smiled desperately. "All right! *All* debts canceled, fellows, what do you say?" And as I exited the room, hastily pushing Courier ahead of me, I could hear Babin's roar of denial over the timid chorus of agreement.

"What on Earth possessed you to *do* that?" I exploded, when we were a safe distance down the corridor. "It's all very well for you to be careless of your own cover, but you're endangering mine! I'm obliged to live with those men for the next few years, and what will they think of me?"

His face was so stupidly blank I felt guilty at once. If he were indeed some indestructible simpleton, anger was wasted on him; and I was already thinking *poor fellow, it's not his fault after all* when he opened his mouth to speak.

"Say, have you got my orders yet?"

It was as if he had thrown vodka onto a bonfire. My rage, which had shrunk so rapidly into little blue coals, flared to the ceiling again, and higher than the flames of anger and impatience were those of loathing for the scarecrow, the defective, the *badly made machine* that he was. Bigotry? Yes, I suppose so. Humbling thought, isn't it?

"Fool!" I snapped. "Don't you think if any orders had come in I'd have told you? Here!" I grabbed out my laptop and thrust it at him. "You look from now on! Keep it until your damned orders come in, and leave me alone!"

I set off down the corridor to my room, but he followed me swiftly. "Can't we go somewhere else? Isn't there anything else to do around here?" he pleaded.

"No! But here's an order for you, you imbecile!" I turned on him. "*Go to your room and stay there!*"

His reaction was extraordinary. All the color drained from his face; with a queer frightened look he dodged around me and stumbled down the corridor to his room. I went into my own quarters, feeling guilty again. What could be wrong with the creature? Well, I hadn't made him

the way he was, anyway; and surely I'd played host beyond the call of duty. Perhaps he'd let me get a full night's sleep now.

Dawn next day found me creeping from my room, carrying a real volume of Schiller and the envelope containing the access code strip. I left the stockade and descended the steep path into the cove. The old shipyard was still being used for carpentry, and the forge and tannery were down here too; but it was still so early that there was no one about to see me hurry across the footbridge and disappear into the woods on the other side of the stream. I found a clearing under a stand of red pines with a floor of dry brown needles; and there I settled down happily, took out Mendoza's letter, and accessed the code at last.

Instantly my mind was ringing with Latin names and three-dimensional images of growing things and their uses. To my astonishment I realized that acorn meal from *Quercus agrifolia*, if left to mold, produced a useful antibiotic. And the leaves of *Rubus ursinus* could be used against dysentery? Really? And, my goodness, what a lot of uses for *Asclepias speciosa*, which was nothing more than milkweed!

Oh, well. Doubtless I'd find dozens of interesting little weeds next time I went exploring. For now, however, I intended to stay where I was until Courier got his damned orders and took his much-desired leave. I was thoroughly weary of him: I yawned, stretched out my boots and immersed myself in Schiller's poems.

What a pleasant morning I had. Before long the forge started up, and a breeze brought me the hot smell of charcoal and the bell-note of hammer on anvil. At the bottom of my glade the stream rushed and chattered along, brown as tea. It was a holy stream, I remembered with amusement; not long ago a visiting priest had blessed it, and consecrated it, and now we had an unlimited supply of holy water. How thoughtful of the reverend father! Just what was needed on the frontier.

My idyll was shattered by no end of commotion at the forge. I jumped up and ran to the edge of my clearing, where I beheld Konstantin the smith, hip-deep in the stream, splashing and stumbling in a circle. He was trying to shake off a tiny mongrel dog, which had hold of the seat of his trousers with a positive death-grip and swung by its clamped teeth, growling ferociously. Konstantin sobbed oaths upon the little cur, imploring a whole host of blessed saints to smash it like a cockroach. From the bank of the stream four little naked Indians watched with solemn black eyes.

"What happened?" I ran to them.

"Tsar bit him," replied the tallest of the children.

"Vasilii Vasilievich!" wept the blacksmith. "Help me, in God's Holy Name! Get it off me!"

"For heaven's sake, man, it's the size of a rat! Why did the doggie bite him?" I turned again to the boy.

"He came running out here with his pants on fire," the child replied. "It

was neat. Then he jumped in the water where we were swimming. We jumped out and Tsar jumped in to bite him. He's a brave dog."

That was when I realized that it wasn't Konstantin's trousers the dog had seized with such energy. No wonder he was crying. I waded hastily into the stream and somehow pried Tsar loose, but he had tasted blood and yapped viciously for more. I held him out at arm's length, squeaking and struggling, as I bent to examine poor Konstantin's backside.

Yes, the seat of the trousers had quite burnt away, and in addition to the dog bite he had a thoroughly ugly second-degree burn on either buttock.

"Tsk! This is a serious burn, my friend," I told him.

"I know that, you idiot!" he groaned. "I mean—excuse me—can't you *do* something about it? I'm suffering the pains of Hell!"

"Well, er, of course. Sit down in the water again while I determine a course of treatment for you." What a chance to show off my new knowledge of the local healing herbs! I accessed hurriedly. Let's see, what might be growing here that was useful for burns? *Sambucus canadensis*, of course! That was the native elderberry tree, wasn't it? Hadn't I seen one growing along the bank near here? I turned and waded ashore, holding out Tsar to his master. The dog's growling subsided like a teakettle taken off the fire.

"Listen to me, children! There's an elder tree growing up there on the bank. Perhaps your mommies use the leaves to make poultices? Yes? No? Well, will you be good children and fetch me some branches so I can make a soothing poultice for this poor man?" I implored. Up on the bluff a small crowd of colonists had gathered, drawn by all the noise.

"Vasilii Vasilievich, I'm dying!" moaned the blacksmith, writhing in the water. "Oh, Holy Saints, oh, Mother of God, why did I ever leave Irkutsk for this savage place?"

"All right," chorused the little Indians, and scampered away bright-eyed with excitement. Konstantin howled and prayed until they returned bearing green branches laden down with tiny blue berries. I gathered them up, confused. What did one *do* with them, exactly? Tsar's master knew an indecisive adult when he saw one, fortunately.

"You pound them up on a rock!" he yelled helpfully. "Want us to do it?" Without waiting for a reply he grabbed up a water-worn cobble and began mashing the berries into a slimy mess on the top of a boulder. The other children crowded around him while Tsar stalked stiff-legged along the bank, snarling at Konstantin.

In no time at all they'd reduced leaves and berries and all to a nasty-looking goo. "All right, Konstantin Kirillovich," I told him, "please rise from the water. I've got an excellent native salve that'll take the pain away." I scooped up a handful of the muck and prepared to clap it on his seared derriere, while the children looked on expectantly.

And, well, my nerve gave way. How could this horrible stuff help a burn like that? I found myself digging into my coat for the little book of skin repair tissue we field agents carry. Yes, I know it's forbidden! But, you know, the truth is, our medicine works just as well on mortals as it works on us. Stealthily I tore out three or four of the sheets and stuck them on the blacksmith's behind, but he caught a glimpse of what I was doing over his shoulder.

"Prayers you're putting on my ass?" he screamed. "Are you crazy?"

"No!" I smeared the elderberry poultice on to disguise what I'd done. "That was merely, um, medical parchment, very useful in forming a base for the compound, you see—"

"Listen, you big St. Petersburg pansy—" he grated; then a remarkable expression crossed his face as the drugs in the skin replacement were released into his system. "The pain's gone!" he gasped. He reached behind and felt himself; then crouched down in the water to wash off the salve. By the time he rose, dripping, the synthetic skin had fused with his own and looked fresh and pink as on the day of his birth.

"Hooray!" yelled the children, jumping up and down in triumph, while Tsar went mad with barking.

"It's *healed*," Konstantin stated in wonderment. Then he stared down at the swirling water. "It must have been this stream! I was here when the little father blessed it! It's a miracle! The holy water has worked a miracle!"

I squelched wearily back up the bank, as his cries brought spectators from the bluff down for a closer look at the Miracle of the Holy Stream. Courier was not among them, at least. Ought I go see if he'd finally got his orders and gone? Perhaps I should go call on the Munin family to see how Andrei Efimovich's leg was mending. Perhaps I should look for specimens of *Asclepias speciosa*. There were a thousand better things to concern myself with than a difficult fellow operative. I was supposed to be a doctor, wasn't I?

And so I resolutely put Courier out of my mind and spent the rest of the day trudging from hut to house, with the intention of getting to know my patients better. I was not particularly successful; anyone who had the least ache or pain had run down to the Holy Stream and was bathing in its icy waters. Not necessarily bad for business: I might have a few cases of pneumonia by the week's end. But I did lance an abscessed gum for a Kashaya woman, and recommend a salve for a Creole baby's flea bites; so I was of some use to my mortal community.

There was no sign of Courier when I returned to the stockade that evening, through pumpkin fields, with the late red sun throwing long shadows of corn shocks where they stood in bundles. There was no sign of him when I sat down to dinner in the officers' mess, and attempted to join in the general conversation in a pleasant and comradely way. Not

that I had much to contribute, with my pocket edition of Schiller, and nobody invited me to play cards with them. I was the recipient of a few distinctly dirty looks, in fact, especially from Iakov Babin.

I took a candle and wandered off to my room, my volume of poetry tucked sadly away in my coat. When I got there, I had the most peculiar feeling that something was somehow not quite right. I held up my candle and looked around.

My bunk, with its blanket, was undisturbed; so was my sea-chest. My Imperial Navy sabre still hung in its place of honor on the wall. My little stack of books was where it ought to be. Of course, my laptop credenza wasn't there . . . perhaps Courier had left it in the guest room? I decided to wait until morning to look for it. Oh, yes, I know, *you'd* have gone straight in to see if he really had gone. I simply didn't want to. I lit my lamp and blew out the candle. A plume of greasy smoke curled, pungent, from the snuffed wick.

That was when I heard the growl.

A growl, I say. It wasn't a dog; it wasn't a bear. God only knew what it was, but it had emanated from the other side of the plank wall. From Courier's room. Oh, dear.

I scanned. I couldn't make sense of my readings. Courier seemed to be in the room, and yet—

I lit the candle again and went out into the corridor, where I knocked at Courier's door. There was a scuttling sound. No light showing under the door, or between the planks. *What was going on here?* I drew a deep breath and pulled open the door.

Darkness, and as the wavering light of my candle moved through the doorway I beheld a tangled mass on the floor. I prodded it with my boot. Strips of something? A trade blanket, torn to shreds. Interspersed with brittle glinting fragments and scraps of paper that had once been a framed picture of the Tsar. *Where was Courier?*

Cautiously I raised the candle and looked upward.

It was on the ceiling, wedged in an angle of roof and rafters. It was Courier up there clinging to the rafters, or had been.

Any mortal standing there in the dark, gazing up in the light of one shaky candle, would have seen a creature with dead white skin, enormous black insectile eyes, fangs and claws and a general strange misshapen muscularity. That sensible mortal would promptly have fled in terror. I, lumpish immortal, stared in bewilderment.

I saw an immortal in the direst extremity of self-protective fear. Blood had fled from his surface capillaries, leaving his skin pale; the protective lenses over his eyes had hardened and darkened. His gums had receded to give his teeth the maximum amount of cutting surface and his nails had grown out with amazing speed into formidable claws. He looked like nothing so much as Lon Chaney in *London After Midnight*.

The thing worked bulging jaw muscles and inquired:

"DUCITNE HAEC VIA OSTIA?"

"Courier, for God's sake! What's happened?" I cried.

It turned its head and the black surface of its eyes glittered as it fixed on me. **"DA MIHI IUSSUM!"** it croaked. What world, what time was it in?

I fell silent, as the horror of the thing sank into me, that one of *us* could suffer such an alteration. We, perfect mechanisms, in our endless lives see mortal men reduced by every degradation that disease and mischance can impose, skeletal horrors, sore-covered, deformed; but never *we*. Why had he become this thing?

He dropped on me, screaming.

Think. How many times in your long life have you avoided mortal assault? It's easy, isn't it? One can sidestep a blade or a fist or even a bullet without turning a hair, because mortal sinews are weak, mortal reflexes slow. Poor brutes. But could you ever have dreamed you might have to defend yourself against another immortal? *How would you do it?*

I tell you that *I myself* began to change. That writhing horror dove for my throat, and even as I grappled with it I felt an indefinable metamorphosis commencing. I was not frightened, either, *me*, can you believe that? One split second of vertigo, and then the strangest glee filled my heart. All my senses were sharpened. I fought with the demented thing in that room and it seemed clumsy and blundering to me, though it moved with a speed mortal eyes couldn't have followed. Equals as we were in immortal strength, I had the advantage of sanity. My hideous new wisdom told me how to win and I pulled the creature's head close, in both my hands, to—

To do something; to this day I haven't remembered what I was about to do. In any case I never did it. What happened, you see, was that I looked into the creature's eyes. Black reflecting mirrors, its eyes, and what they showed me was a nightmare thing like the nightmare thing I was fighting! So taloned, so razor-grinned, with just such a glittering stare. A monster in the disintegrating clothing of a Russian gentleman. *Me*.

I fell back from it, staring at my hands in horror: my nails had grown with fantastic acceleration into serviceable claws. My horrified cry joined the creature's as it leapt at my face. I rolled away from it, shielding myself as best I could, and burst out through the doorway. Babin and the others, drawn by the commotion, were just arriving at the end of the corridor. I flung myself down, covered my face with my hands and yelled: "*A dybbuk! Run for your lives, it's a dybbuk!*"

My speech was hissed and slurred, but I doubt if anyone noticed, for the thing hesitated only a moment before plunging across the threshold after me. As it tore strips out of the back of my coat, what was I doing? I ask you to believe I was *biting my nails*, frantically. I didn't want to be a devil with talons. I was a man, a superior man!

"Run, you fools!" I cried. Yes, yes, I was speaking with a man's voice now, I was changing back.

Babin at least took a step backward, crossing himself, and the others shuffled back behind him. Courier's head snapped about to stare.

"Quanto costa il biglietto per Marsiglia?" he demanded. I used the opportunity to open my door and scramble in on my hands and knees. Courier's neck snaked around with the fluid movement of a Harryhausen demon. He snarled and sprang into the room after me.

"*Mixaham beravam! Bayad beravam!*" he roared, coming for me with talons raised to rake. I scrambled backward, I hit the wall with such force the building shook and the planks of the wall, thick as Bibles, cracked and started. Something was knocked loose. I caught it in midair as it dropped past my face. My Imperial Navy saber. In the same second I had put my boot up to halt Courier's oncoming rush and kicked him in the chest with all my strength. He flew backward and hit the opposite wall; crash, and more planks split. There was a thunder of running steps as the mortals rushed down the hall to look through the doorway.

"**LE BATEAU-MOUCHE EST EN RETARD!**" Courier cried, in a voice that made the mortals cover their ears. I was desperately trying to shake the scabbard off the saber; something was wrong with the mechanism of my left arm. Blood and oil were drooling from Courier's jaws as he sprang again, straight for me, and my good arm went up and whipped the saber in an arc that passed through his neck. His head flew off, hit the wall, and rolled to Iakov Babin's feet.

All my strength left me. I became aware that I was badly damaged. I slid to the floor. Courier's body was already still, having gone into fugue at the moment my blade broke the connection between the Sinclair Chain of his spine and the titanium gimbal of his skull. Already the neck arteries had sealed themselves off and a protective membrane was forming. His head was doing the same. Eyes, ears, nostrils were exuding a thick substance that would seal them against further injury.

"God damn, Doc!" Babin broke the appalled silence. "That was one fine sword cut! You fought like a man."

I had, by God. "Thank you," I said with difficulty. My lips were split and bruised. The rest of my fleshly parts hurt as well. "You were right, Iakov Dmitrivich. He was a *dybbuk*."

"I told you." He stepped into the room cautiously, edging around the body. The other mortals cowered in the doorway. Someone was whimpering hysterically. "I seen devils in this New World just as ornery as any we got in Mother Russia. You ask the Indians. I reckon this one killed that boy, whoever he was, and possessed his body. Are you hurt bad, Doc?"

"I think my arm is broken."

"And some ribs, too, I reckon." He squatted down and peered at me in awe. "God Almighty, Doc, you're beat up black and blue. You sure put up

one hell of a fight, though. Wouldn't have thought you'd had it in you. Come on, boys, let's get him up on the bed."

"What are we going to do with *that*?" The junior manager pointed with a trembling finger at the body.

"Take it out and bury it at a crossroads?" The farm foreman stepped in and gingerly lifted the head by its hair. "That's what the stories say to do. And put a stake through its heart, or it'll come back to get us!"

I let them lift me into my bunk, too impaired to protest. Besides, it didn't matter. The moment Courier's head had been severed a distress beacon had been activated, transmitting straight to the nearest Dr. Zeus HQ. Wherever he was buried, a repair crew would retrieve both his parts within hours. He'd be whisked away to a hospital and I hadn't the slightest doubt he'd be good as new within days, assuming they could do something about that nasty psychosis of his. I, on the other hand, would have to heal myself, and my self-diagnostic-and-repair program didn't seem to be working very well.

The body with its head was stuffed into a sack and hustled out by Babin and a party of others. Someone sent a Creole woman up with a basin of water and a rag to tend to my hurts. Her almond eyes widened at the extent of the damage, but she didn't say much; and it would have been rather pleasant to lie there being ministered to, but for Andreev the assistant manager rushing in.

"Kalugin! What on earth is this story that you've killed a man?"

"Self-defense," I said in my feeblest voice. "It was the visitor. He went mad, sir . . . tried to kill me . . . all the men witnessed it. . . ."

Andreev was looking around wildly at the blood and smashed walls. He noticed the saber lying almost at his feet and did a little two-step dance back from it.

"God in Heaven! You killed him with a *sword*? What will General Manager Kostromitinov say?"

What indeed? I pretended to lapse into unconsciousness. The *dybbuk* story would sound more convincing if Babin told it, I was certain. Andrei Fedorovich stood there wringing his hands a moment longer, and then ran out of the room. I let myself slide into genuine oblivion. . . .

"Marine Operations Specialist Kalugin?" It was a suave voice speaking cultured Cinema Standard that woke me. I opened my eyes. A man in a neat grey suit of clothes was sitting at the foot of my bed, by the light of my wildly flickering lamp.

"West Coast Facilitator-General Labienus," he introduced himself with a slight inclination from the waist.

"We'll be overheard—" I tried to rise on one elbow, indicating my open door, but he negated me with a wave of his hand.

"We've activated a Hush Field over the settlement. None of the mortals here can regain consciousness at present. We're recovering Courier—

what's left of him, anyway—from his grave out there on the road. I'm afraid we owe you something of an explanation."

That took a moment to sink in. I opened my mouth to demand answers, but he held up his hand. "Please. Don't tire yourself. You want to know how one of Us could suffer something like madness when we're all perfect, don't you? It's really quite simple. Courier wasn't—exactly—one of us."

I stared. Choosing his words with delicacy, he went on. "I suppose you've heard the old rumors about Flawed Ones, about fantastic creatures produced millennia ago when Dr. Zeus hadn't perfected the immortality process. Well, of course those stories aren't true; but it seems that, back in the early days, one or two individuals *were* produced who weren't quite up to Company standards." He drew from his inner breast pocket a slim silver case and, opening it, selected a silver-wrapped stick. "Theobromos, by the way?" He offered me the case. I took one gratefully, unwrapping it single-handed. My arm hadn't repaired itself yet. He resumed:

"Now, as you know, Dr. Zeus is a humane organization. Simple termination of the poor creatures was out of the question." *Especially since they were immortal*, I thought to myself darkly. I put the Theobromos in my mouth. Oh, welcome bliss. It was highest-quality Guatemalan. Labienus watched my dreamy smile with amusement.

"Of course the Company found places for them. But in Courier's case—and by now you'll have guessed he was one of these substandard unfortunates—there were special circumstances that made it a particular challenge.

"It has to do with his autoimmune system, you see. Dr. Zeus had already perfected Hyperfunction, but at that time there was no reason to believe it wouldn't work equally well on all subjects, regardless of personal biochemistry. However, Courier's metabolism presented certain problems.

"What's the simplest way to put this? You could say that his body decided his own RNA was a pathogen, and set about attacking it, breaking it down. The Company stabilized most of his metabolic response, but the spontaneous nature of short-term memory proved beyond them. You're aware that the brain stores memory in RNA molecules? Of course you are.

"I won't confuse you with the details, but the end result is that Courier reacts to memory as though it were a disease process. Any repeated specific experience and he undergoes an adverse reaction. Consistently repeat a specific sequence of events and paranoid psychosis is the result, with all the attendant physical manifestations you saw."

"You mean spending two nights in his room made him a demon from Hell?"

"Merely the effect of Hyperfunction on the human fight-or-flight reflex," said Labienus dismissively. "It's not his fault, poor creature. And, after all, Dr. Zeus found just the job for him! They made him a long-distance courier. As long as he's traveling, as long as he's constantly exposed to new sights he's never seen before, the adverse RNA reaction can't build up. He can even retrace old journeys, if enough years elapse between visits. Trouble only occurs if he's obliged to stay in one place for more than twenty-four hours, but of course Dr. Zeus has always taken care to ensure that new orders are waiting for him at every destination."

"What happened in this case?"

Labienus looked aside. "A minor clerical blunder. His orders were forwarded to the wrong terminal. The clerk responsible has been disciplined."

"How comforting."

"I'm sure it will never happen again. And we'll fasten on his head and he'll be off on his travels again, to New York or Mazatlan or Warsaw, good as new, with no memory of this unfortunate occurrence. He never remembers anything very long, actually, if it isn't something hard-wired like a language. Except for the plots of films he's seen. Those he retains, for some reason."

"Poor thing," I mused. *Very good Theobromos*, this.

"Do you think so? I rather envy him, myself. Imagine a life of endless new horizons! Nothing to bore him or dull his palate, no tedious *sameness* to his experiences. All his friends will be new friends." Labienus smiled wistfully and put his silver case away. "Well. Principally what *you* need to know is that of course there'll be no disciplinary hearing for you. We *quite* understand that under the circumstances you had no choice but to badly damage a fellow operative. We *would* like to know why you didn't contact us sooner—his psychotic behavior must certainly have been increasingly *obvious*. . . ."

"Er, well—I did try—and then I didn't have access to my credenza, you see." I began to sweat a little. And did I feel just a trace of pain in my fingertips? "I loaned it to him—"

"Yes; we found it in the rafters. Well, no real harm done, it appears; though I'm afraid you'll have some explaining to do to your mortal authorities. I'm certain you'll follow standard operating procedures this time, though, and acquit yourself with flying colors. Shame I can't give you anything to speed up your self-repair; but then, if you got up tomorrow without a scratch on you after that fight, you'd *really* have some explaining to do, wouldn't you?" He chuckled and smacked my thigh in a companionable sort of way. It hurt. A short in my femoral wiring finally fixed itself and informed me that I had a massive hematoma there and several torn ligaments. As I was reflecting on this, another immortal appeared in my doorway.

"Sir? Recovery operation completed. All personnel are aboard and ready for departure."

"Then I'm off." Labienus rose, adjusting his coat and shooting his cuffs. "Well, Kalugin. I hope our next meeting takes place under more pleasant circumstances. You *will* transmit your full report within the next forty-eight hours, I trust? Good. Until next time." He stepped out into the corridor.

"How old is he?" I blurted.

"Who? Courier?" Labienus looked in at me, arching his eyebrows. "Thirty thousand years, I believe." He walked away and then stuck his head back through the doorway for a second. "Oh, by the way—happy Halloween." He flashed a smile and was gone.

So that was the end of it, at least as far as Dr. Zeus was concerned. I myself was in a tight spot for a while. As soon as he heard about the incident, Kostromitinov became convinced it was some sort of loathsome crime of homosexual passion, and had me arrested. Fedor Svinin got a few days' holiday, because our jail was only big enough to accommodate one person. He used the time to go fishing and caught pneumonia.

At the inquest it was discovered that my pretty Creole girl had decided to tidy up my room whilst I was unconscious, and had cleaned the blood off the murder weapon and put it back in its sheath. Better still, the victim's body had vanished from its grave and was nowhere to be found when an exhumation order was given. Best of all, I had a roomful of witnesses swearing on their immortal souls that the person I'd beheaded hadn't been a human being at all. Iakov Babin was particularly vehement on my behalf, and his testimony counted for something: he was a man with a lot of experience at beating murder raps.

Thus the case never came to trial, and I was left under a sort of half-hearted house arrest that nobody bothered to enforce. And, you know, the rest of my time there was extraordinarily happy! I became accepted, respected, *liked*. Apparently a man who can deliver babies with one hand and kill *dybbuks* with the other was just what people wanted on the frontier. I stayed on at the Ross colony until it was sold to Mr. Sutter ten years later, though I didn't go home with my fellow Russians right away: but that's another story.

I can't say it's a comfort to think that Courier is still out there on the road somewhere, in endless transit like an orbiting moon. It's likely enough that at some point in the next thirty thousand years our paths will cross again, so I'm grateful he won't remember me.

But, think about it: you may well have seen him yourself. In some city, on some tourist boat or in some railway carriage, there is always a stupid young man in the happy morning of his life, chatting with perfect strangers and exclaiming over the scenery; and he is always alone. ●

Robert Reed

Robert Reed has had a run of good fortune lately. His short story, "Decency" (June 1996), won our Eleventh Annual Readers' Award Poll, and it is currently nominated for a Hugo award. In September, his latest novel, *Beneath the Gated Sky* (a sequel to his well-received *Beyond the Veil of Stars*), went on sale and he was married just short of his forty-first birthday. Unfortunately, all of this good cheer doesn't spill over into his coldly furnished new tale about how distorted the world can appear through our . . .

MIND'S EYE

A word of warning: there are a few scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

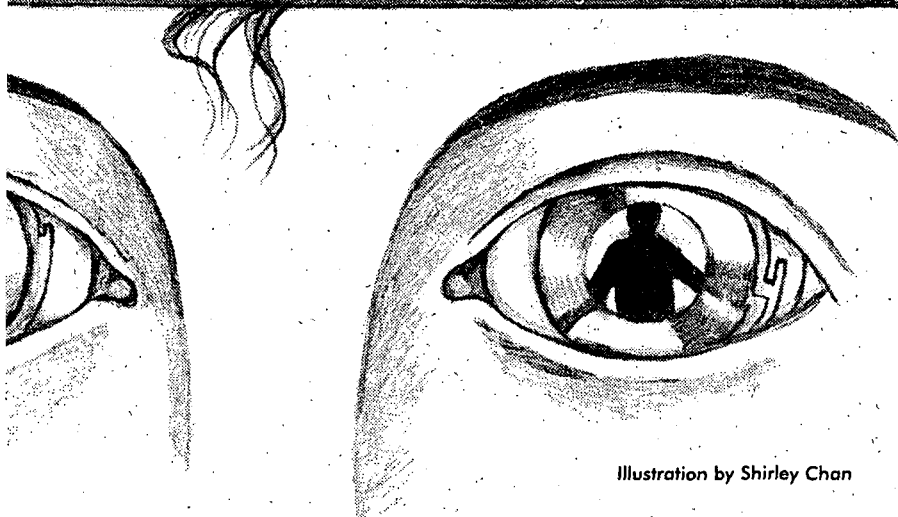


Illustration by Shirley Chan

The most dangerous minds in the solar system stand about in little knots and horseshoes, sipping watery drinks, breathing the sea air, and gazing skyward, reveling in their good fortune. It's a clear night on the heels of an excellent dinner, and, according to coded reports, nothing of substance has affected their timetable. But best of all, Kay-

becker has yet to arrive. Their project manager has reportedly been delayed—an unexpected blessing, and all the more sweet because of it. The scientists tingle with nervous excitement, referring to their internal clocks as the evening progresses, marking the minutes, then the seconds, whispers joining into a single shared voice that ends with a shouted, “Zero!” at precisely twenty-two seconds after 2200 Pacific War Time.

In that moment, the entire earth plunges into a blackout, cities and military posts sipping from stored power, while every tokamak, solar array, and shit-burning turbine funnels its output into a single weapon system.

Fifty thousand kilometers overhead, a breach and muzzle are being woven from invisible magnetic juices.

In that, nothing is new.

These blackouts and the subsequent barrages occur daily. It has been the routine for decades. Forever, it seems. But new tricks are coming on-line tonight. The pulse will be briefer than ever, and hotter, a bolt of charged particles and viscous plasmas focused on the enemy's final stronghold. And to give the blast even more muscle, orbiting railguns have been launching warheads for the last hour—ceramic-jacketed thousand-megaton bullets raining down on the hapless target, waiting to be ignited in a single apocalyptic moment.

Seattle lies several hundred kilometers north of the celebration, and, when the blackout comes, its silvery glow fades away in an instant, the stars and orbiting stations brighter, and the full moon suddenly close.

People begin to quietly applaud the sky.

A thundering voice interrupts, shouting, “What a night! A perfect night for lovers, isn't it?”

Kaybecker arrives. Resplendent as always, he wears a long robe adorned with vivid orange and black stripes patterned after a species of poisonous treefrog. The requisite body armor beneath gives him bulges and even more than the usual bulk. His helmet is a mirrored blister. His transparent flash-mask distorts a wide, pugnacious face. Gripping his shoulders is a long black cape. Woven from photoactivated aerogels, its fabric is nearly weightless, keyed to respond to reddish light. The instant that Kaybecker steps into the open meadow, his cape feels the moonlight, and it rises and begins to billow, resembling a breath of tethered, unhappy smoke.

Kaybecker's eyes close, and for a long moment, he says nothing.

Then a wide hand lifts, and his voice bellows, “Hello, darlings! My children! How's the barbecue coming. . . ?”

A hundred geniuses suddenly feel foolish, unable to recall what they had just said or even why they are here. Kaybecker has that effect. He is brash and insulting, and despised, and, in his own peculiar fashion, unquestionably brilliant. Just his presence is enough to make subordinates shiver, more than a few glancing up at the moon, wishing things could end now. Please, now.

Huddled together in their own corner of the yard are several dozen military and civilian observers. Kaybecker approaches, shaking hands and greeting each by name, a magnificent smile married to an aggressive charm. "How do you like the weather?" he asks. "I demanded it. Pulled in some favors. Not one fucking cloud, you'll notice. Farms need rain, but, the way I see it, my people deserve a clear night even more."

The ranking general—a tall woman, homelier than homely—gestures at the cliff behind them. "We'd see more from underground, what with cameras and sensors."

Kaybecker dismisses her with a snort. "We'll have the rest of our lives to watch the recordings," he argues. "But what we're doing here . . . this is standing on the front lines . . . nothing between what happens and us but our own eyes. . . !"

The logic fails to impress.

Kaybecker doesn't care. He sweeps a drink from a passing platter, then tells the officer beneath, "I want to see your captain. Bring him."

"Yes, sir."

"And that one officer . . . Nagel. . . !" He closes his eyes, and smiles. "Have Nagel bring my dinner to me, please."

"Yes . . . sir . . ."

The captain is a beautiful man of imprecise race. He wears a dress uniform and military eyes that resemble polished anthracite. In charge of project security for only the last five weeks, he offers a crisp salute, saying, "You asked for me, sir?"

Kaybecker's human eyes open, his smile changing. Hardening. "Tell me everything's going well."

"Very well, sir."

"Our enemies aren't about to attack, are they?"

The captain hesitates, reading data projected into his thick flash-mask. Then he tells everyone in earshot, "No, sir. The rebels are confused. No one notices us. . . ."

The project's labs are buried in the nearby mountains, and the entire area is bathed in EM camouflage, three equally plausible cover stories explaining their little gathering, including false communication nets run by competing agencies, none of which knows the project's true purpose.

"Everything is on track, sir."

Kaybecker smiles at the captain, at the artificial eyes and his handsome, arrogant face. Then the smile vanishes, replaced by a stew of expressions laid one on top of another, and no one, not even Kaybecker, able to follow his emotions.

"Is there anything else, sir?"

"I don't know. Is there?" Kaybecker gives a big wet sigh, then says, "I remember asking for my dinner—"

"Here it is, sir."

With identical motions, both men turn toward the voice. Officer Nagel stands in moonlight, a plate balanced in little hands. Fixed to a smaller face, her glass eyes appear larger than the captain's eyes. She wears a crisp purple-black uniform over battle armor, plus a simple mirrored helmet. Rebel fire, weak to begin with and diluted by the atmosphere, would never kill her. The real danger is closer, and cooler. "Oh, good," it tells her. "I was hoping to bump into you, Nagel."

She can't help but glance at her captain.

Then she looks away, remembering to smile.

Kaybecker finds some reason to laugh. "It's Callene, isn't it?"

"Callene Nagel. Yes, sir." She offers a tiny nod, then the plate, betraying hopefulness when she tells him, "My post is at the beach, sir. Serving guard duty—"

"Fuck that," Kaybecker roars. Then he turns to the captain, adding, "She stays with me. Find someone to stand in for her, if you think it's necessary."

"I think . . ." The captain sputters, then regains his voice. "What's necessary is that my officer stays where I put her—"

"Why? Are the rebels going launch a beach assault?" Kaybecker pounds him with a hard laugh, then says, "She stays. You're excused. Captain."

"I would prefer—"

"No," Kaybecker warns.

Scientists watch the drama. Privy to the gossip, they know exactly what's happening, and exactly how it will end.

"Very well," the captain relents. "May I go, sir?"

"Christ, please do!"

Glancing at Nagel, the captain shakes his head slightly, then turns and walks across the yard, vanishing among the partygoers.

With a massive hand, Kaybecker claims his dinner plate. Then he throws his free arm around the woman, squeezing armor and a shoulder. "You'll be my personal assistant for the evening. What do you say?"

She doesn't hesitate or show a thread of disgust. "My pleasure, sir."

"How long before the blast?" he asks.

She tells him what he already knows. "Another forty-two minutes, sir."

"Perfect!" The groping hand releases her, with effort. "By the way. What am I eating here, Nagel?"

"Cultured horse and blood onions, sir. Your favorites."

"Yes." He laughs, watery eyes closing for a long moment. Then he takes a huge breath and wills the eyes to open again, and he turns, addressing the nearby scientists. "A word to the brilliant!" he cries out. "This is how to please your tyrant. Satisfy his basal urges! Satisfy them, and he'll be your defender and your finest friend!"

Only six weeks ago, Callene Nagel was transferred from Seattle Command, replacing another young woman who had unfortunately drowned herself in the cold Pacific. Within an hour of her arrival, she was taken to the project manager's private quarters and told to wait. "For what purpose, sir?" She asked for an explanation, already knowing the answer, and not just because any woman of her rank and appearance would sense what was happening. "I've barely had time to unpack—"

"Enough," her new captain snapped. He was a small, disgusting man with a small plain face. Showing a mixture of amusement and cool concern, he told her, "There's the chance that you won't have to unpack, provided things go badly."

"Sir?"

"Unless of course you *want* to be posted to some orbiting shithole. Then I suppose bad is sweet, and sweet luck to you."

"Yes, sir."

"At ease, Nagel."

She obeyed, watching the captain making his brisk retreat.

Most of the underground facility was cramped, but, by contrast, Kaybecker's quarters were enormous and luxurious. The room surrounding Callene was long enough to feel huge, yet narrow enough to inspire intimacy. Its walls and high ceiling were battle-grade armor disguised as teakwood, and one long wall was lined with mock-windows, each window projecting an image piped in through a thousand meters of ancient stone and anti-kinetic barricades.

Callene looked out at a long meadow flanked by Douglas firs, and, far beyond, a purplish trace of sunshine vanishing into the ocean.

She refused to think about Kaybecker.

And she couldn't risk thinking about *him*, even in passing.

So she remembered another man's touch—a surgeon's—and his silky promises. He would be gentle and quick, and when Callene could see again, soon, she would have an eagle's vision. Then, with an expert violence, the surgeon yanked her living eyes out of their sockets and tossed them into the trash, replacing them with a pair of machines, and, with a smooth voice, he told the blind recruit, "It's almost too bad. You had rather lovely eyes."

Security troops were required to endure such improvements. New eyes opened on worlds built out of relentless details. They could peer into the infrared and high, high into the ultraviolet. The feeblest glow was like day, yet nothing was so brilliant that it could make them blink. And when the eyes focused on a human face, they absorbed every flaw and whatever beauties lay between. . . .

Callene closed her perfect eyes, and sighed.

On bare feet, Kaybecker strode into the room, and with a simple, firm voice observed, "You're still in uniform."

In uniform, and armed. Callene turned and looked, finding soft lights burning and her host wearing nothing but a long satin bathrobe, his unhandsome face smiling, his living eyes pale, and his intentions obvious in the glint of the eyes and in the wagging bulge that showed in the robe's blue-silver fabric.

"Nagel, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"You look like you'd rather be elsewhere, Nagel. Anywhere else, I'm thinking."

No response was accurate and safe. *He* once told her that when she had doubts about what to say, she should say nothing, using dignified silence. "People fill silence with whatever they want to hear," he had promised. "Let them mislead themselves. They'll only be too glad to do it."

That's what she did.

Kaybecker's home was furnished with twentieth-century antiques, worth fortunes and arranged like trophies. The long sofa was sewn together from animal hides. The low table in front of it had been carved from an extinct species of tropical tree. On its butchered red wood lay an assortment of paper books, their covers decorated with photographs of vanished wildernesses and dead sports heroes.

A fat glass was suddenly handed to her, half-filled with an aromatic, piss-colored liquor. Callene's nose was augmented, inlaid with the olfactory cells of a Malaysian night moth, leaving her able to sniff out ten thousand separate explosives, plus poisons and every known psychoactive drug, including the crude female aphrodisiac swirling in her glass.

"Don't smell it," was Kaybecker's advice. "Drink it."

Carried on his breath were the smells of stomach acids, half-digested meat, and the male-equivalent of the same inadequate drug.

Callene took two sips, then turned away, setting her glass beside the antique books. The aphrodisiac was useless. Her nervous system had been secretly conditioned to ignore chemical coercions. But Kaybecker expected some reaction, and to mollify him, she pretended to shudder, glancing back at him and telling the truth. "You have a lovely home."

"Better than the dorms," he replied.

Better than any bureaucrat could afford, she knew. But Kaybecker's career had been built on unlikely success coupled with a shameless abuse of power. What museum did he raid in order to collect these treasures. . . ?

"Take off that uniform," Kaybecker ordered. Then with a tenth-hearted attempt at tenderness, he added, "Officer Nagel. Please."

She was wearing an indoor helmet and a partial flash-mask. Callene removed the straps and let herself look out the nearest window, glancing north, at a column of milky light standing above Seattle.

Against every order, she was thinking about *him*.

There was no helping it.

Kaybecker's patience ran dry. Stepping close, he took the helmet and tossed it to the floor with a sharp thud. Then he grasped her shoulders and spun her, Callene resisting just enough to let him know that she was at least his strength and nearly his will, and that when she relented, it was her decision. Not his.

Tactics shifted. Another broad smile made the face boyish. Then he said, "Look," as something bright flashed across the sky. Falling, shattering. Gone. "Did you see?"

Her peripheral vision was spectacular.

"It was square," she offered. "Part of a solar panel, maybe."

"Not maybe," Kaybecker confided. "We lost another orbital farm today."

She feigned concern. "I don't remember any attacks."

"Wasn't one," he promised. "It was pure sabotage. Rebel infiltrators planted finger-nukes along the farm's spine."

She shut her eyes, for just an instant.

"We aren't doing so well up there." He spoke with a calm, grave force. "But that's not exactly a secret, is it? With eyes like yours, you probably watch the war every night."

"They tell us not to look," she replied.

"And you obey them?"

"Yes." As strange as it might sound, she did.

"I would watch, if I had your vision," Kaybecker promised. "But of course, the UN won't dare fuck with me! Not after everything that I've done for them. . . !"

Callene looked at the walls and ceiling. But even with her heightened sense, she couldn't find the nanophones or security cameras embedded in the armor. As part of a secure facility, everything that happened, no matter how trivial, was recorded in full, and the recordings were sent off for AI analysis on the half-second. Which was the weak link, as it happened. What if someone could tinker with the dangerous recordings, editing them, misleading the machines and the machine-like officials whose duty it was to trust them?

"One word from me," she heard, "and you'll be floating on one of those solar farms. How would you like that? Defending a thousand square kilometers of silicon . . . is that why you got into this game. . . ?"

"If it helps our cause—"

"Bullshit, Nagel! Bullshit!"

She closed her eyes, and she saw *him*. For *me*, he told her. Do it for me.

"Lose that goddamn uniform, officer!"

Raven hair was pinned up for the helmet. It came down eagerly, not quite kissing her wide shoulders, framing a face that was a little too strong to be beautiful, solid bones standing behind pale, almost translucent skin. Her black eyes conveyed a hard-won wisdom. When Callene

first looked through those eyes, gazing at herself in the surgeon's mirror, she had noticed that wisdom. It couldn't be hers. Most likely the eyes were salvaged from a dead soldier. More than the UN would admit, field equipment was being refurbished, then implanted in the new recruits.

"The uniform, Nagel."

She stepped away from the window, unfastening her uniform with crisp, clean motions, stopping only to let it fall, then stepping out of the pooled blackness, warning Kaybecker, "You'll be disappointed. I don't have much of a body."

It was the kind of body expected of a female officer, an athletic build enhanced by hard training and a slurry of drugs.

"Not too proud, are you?" Kaybecker laughed, undoing his robe while warning her in turn, "Talk about bodies. Let me show you one that's *grotesque*."

He had a broad pale hairless chest and a substantial belly, and, like many overfed men, his legs were too narrow for his frame. Between his belly and legs, almost lost inside a forest of brown hair, stood an augmented cock, purple and eager.

Callene undid her armor, letting it fall.

She had smallish breasts, firm as muscle, and long ebony nipples. Kaybecker grabbed one breast, then the other, thumbs dancing with the nipples. A thin fluid collected on his left thumb. Sweat, he probably assumed. Rubbing his thumb with a finger, he found it greasy, and with a sniff, the odor pungent and unfamiliar. And unpleasant, said his smirk.

"The couch," he whispered. Then, "You're on top."

Callene closed her eyes as she straddled Kaybecker, one hand massaging him, then aiming him, obeying his grunted commands. The grotesque man was blessedly quick. After a few thrusts and a gut-wounded moan, he came. And because this was the best moment—he had explained the biochemical reasons, all of which Callene had forgotten—she took her right breast in her hand and lowered it, feeding Kaybecker the long nipple and the moistened aureole, telling him, "Lick it." Telling him, "Now."

A wide tongue obeyed.

There was a small slurp, then hesitation. Was something wrong? Weren't the potions working? But the tongue returned, circling the nipple, absorbing an oily stew of exotic narcotics, doctored hormones, and swarms of microchines whose only purpose was to burrow into the tongue, then ride the dark blood into the depths of a mind.

The lovers held that pose for most of an hour.

Mammary glands—highly modified; rigorously camouflaged—were finally sucked dry. Only then could Callene pull away, opening her eyes, discovering Kaybecker wearing a strange vast smile that extended to his pale and wet and exceptionally round eyes. He was staring at her. He looked joyous. Enraptured. But he was also afraid, taking a deep breath

and half-shuddering, some part of him trying to fend off the swift mad thoughts running through his brain.

"I understand," she whispered.

She was tempted to say, "Don't worry. You'll be all right."

But he wouldn't be, of course. And she refused to give him the smallest comfort, smiling bleakly at him, thinking:

This is how I looked. This is how I am with *him*.

Kaybecker's cock had never lost its stiffness. Moving, casually shifting positions, the touch of her leg caused him to come again, a thread of semen dangling in the air, then breaking and beginning to dry.

He sobbed quietly, trying to thank her.

"Quiet," she told him. Just once.

Kaybecker didn't just obey. He took one of his wide hands and planted it squarely over his mouth, enforcing the silence.

Callene was astonished, and disgusted. This vast man was exactly like her, in a sense. Staring at those living eyes, she knew what he felt as he gazed up at his only love. And with that insight, disgust bled into an unexpected pity. Pity made her pull the hand from his mouth, and she quietly asked, "Do you know what love is?"

"A sickness," Kaybecker replied.

Callene smiled in a grim fashion. "It's hormones and it's electricity. That's where it comes from."

"A sickness," he repeated.

"Do you know what your pineal gland is?"

He shook his head, waiting for enlightenment.

"It's the third eye in a reptile," she growled. "Long ago, evolution rolled it back into our heads and made it blind."

A little nod, and silence.

"What if?" she asked. "What if we could resurrect your pineal gland, making it into an eye again?"

"Is that . . . what I feel . . . ?"

"We build a new eye, then we make it see exactly what we want it to see. Always. And everything it sees is piped straight into those parts of the brain that feel love."

Kaybecker contemplated those words, then grinned in a bleak fashion, and with a dangerous, unexpected prescience, asked, "Who do *you* see . . . ?"

"No one," she lied, by reflex.

Then with too much force, she added, "Except you, of course."

The monster had no choice but to smile again, serene for the moment.

Glancing at cameras she couldn't see, Callene prayed that the AIs were being doctored as promised. Then she told her lover, "I don't like your captain. Or my new platoon."

"No?"

"Transfer them," she demanded. "As soon as possible."

Kaybecker didn't simply obey her will. He anticipated her next request, asking, "And who do you want to replace them with?"

"My old unit. From Seattle."

He shook his head, trying to free it of the crazy images.

"Do that for me," Callene promised, "and we'll always be together."

Each of Kaybecker's eyes stared up at *Her*, and, with a voice that bounced from whisper to a near-shout and back again, he asked, "This gland in my head . . . this new eye . . . I can't ever close it, can I?"

"Never. No."

A sudden enrapturing joy filled the face.

"Good!" he moaned. "Good!"

A spiderweb screen has been stretched between fir trees, projecting an image sent from the moon, from a microcamera hidden in the rebels' own barricades. Grainy at best and usually badly blurred, it's nonetheless a remarkable achievement, the camera's whisper-signal having to pierce ten kinds of jamming and a storm of hard radiation.

Partygoers watch an ocean of blood-red magma swirling beneath flocks of blackish rock. An armored rocket races past. A fountain of magma explodes as another nuclear bullet plunges home. The lunar horizon is close and eerily smooth. Decades of war have obliterated Nearside's ancient craters and mountains. And the culprit stands on the horizon: The earth regards the moon with its night face, the Pacific coastline and Seattle obscured by the forty-minute-old blackout.

People have formed an unbalanced horseshoe in front of the screen, scientists on one side and guests on the other. Kaybecker stands in the middle, his arm draped possessively over Callene's shoulder. His dinner plate lies at his feet, forgotten. Crickets and odd beetles march in the remaining gravy, some feasting while the rest quietly drown.

In a booming, confident voice, Kaybecker shouts, "Five minutes! Five minutes!" Then he shakes Callene, saying, "Enthusiasm, Nagel. The war's won in *five minutes!*"

"I know, sir." She attempts a smile, but it looks more like a wince. "I'm optimistic, sir . . . and excited. . . ."

The homely general feels otherwise. With a decided chill, she remarks, "We'll be lucky if we can crack their barricades."

The project's top physicist—a tiny Brazilian famous for his temper—tells the general, "Nevertheless, *sir*. In another few months, we'll have broken them. They won't have a hole left to hide in."

The UN can pulverize rebel bases on Mars and Mercury, and obliterate cities buried on the icy face of Jupiter's moons. Most of the solar system turns relative to the earth, every target eventually passing into view. Except for the farside of the moon, that is. The rebels living there have a ready-made refuge, thousands of kilometers of rock protecting it. Which

is why they place their key industries there, and their best people, and why their swift little ships can harass the earth, even when no rational mind expects them to win.

"I pray you're right," says the general, utterly honest. "I hope we can melt that entire damned rock!"

The physicist laughs, adding, "What we're doing tonight, wielding this kind of power . . . I guarantee, there's absolutely no defense against it. None."

"Four minutes!" Kaybecker hollers. "Say it, Nagel."

"Four minutes," she mutters. "And counting."

The yard seems to grow more crowded, more energetic, yet in the same moment, quieter. People find themselves crowding up to the screen. Conversations fall to whispers, if that. When the image abruptly dissolves into an electric snow, no one complains.

"Three minutes to the barbecue!" Kaybecker roars.

Some glare at him. Some grin. When success does come, the research team will be disbanded. Kaybecker will be sent off to some other troubled project, where he'll use his arrogance and bludgeoning techniques to make others perform. The truth told, the scientists would cheerfully destroy ten thousand worlds, if that's what it took to get out from under Kaybecker.

"One hundred and twenty seconds!" he cries out.

He smiles, and he doesn't.

Kaybecker sounds utterly self-assured, yet buried in that same voice is a distinct fear that begins to show itself. His wide pale eyes close once again, remaining closed. "Ninety seconds," he says, his voice cracking abruptly. Then he gives the poor girl beside him a crushing hug, and, with eyes still closed, he whispers something that the nearest few can just make out.

"I can see you," he tells her mysteriously.

Callene stares at the spiderweb screen, saying, "I can see you, too."

Then she adds, "Sir."

"Always," he announces. "And I always will."

As if in pain, Callene flinches. She starts to say something. It's almost as if she intends to scold him, judging by the way she plants an elbow into his ribs, her face twisting behind her flash-mask, a scalding white anger emerging.

"One minute!" Kaybecker tells everyone.

The captain appears suddenly, pushing in through the crowd, inserting himself between the lovers. Then with a quiet rushed voice, he reports, "Something's wrong."

"Isn't that the plan?" Kaybecker laughs. "It's supposed to go miserably wrong."

Callene and the captain glance at one another, horrorstruck.

No one else can guess what Kaybecker means.

"A Jaguar-class hyperplane is en route," the captain sputters. "From Seattle—"

"Forty seconds," Kaybecker roars.

"It's coming here." The captain shakes his head, taking a half-step backward. "I don't know why. . . ."

"Oh, it was my idea to invite it," Kaybecker admits.

The captain stares off into the distance with a mixture of disbelief and cold terror.

"Why do we need a hyperplane?" asks the homely general. "What's its mission. . . ?"

Kaybecker gives a cackling laugh. "Honestly, I haven't decided yet."

The captain is motionless. Is thinking.

Callene rips herself free of Kaybecker's grasp.

"It is a Jaguar," the general tells everyone, reading data displayed inside her own flash-mask. "With a crew of three, plus finger-nukes and a full load of fuel. Scheduled to arrive in four minutes—"

"Ten seconds," says the project manager.

Then after a deep breath, he says, "Five. And four. And three. And hell, you all know the rest."

The audience remembers why they've gathered here. Faces look skyward, up at the half-molten moon. Even as it fires, the orbiting gun remains invisible. Titanic, unseen energies race out of its magnetic barrel. But once the target is struck, a wavefront of plasmas and furious nuclei interact with cold matter, spreading outward, the blast's sudden glare beyond anything anticipated, or desired, the largest fire ever produced by humans bathing the coastline in a weird pure light that dwarfs the brightest sunshine.

Every flash-mask turns blacker than ink, shielding flesh and living eyes.

Ignoring the panic around him, Kaybecker bends at the waist and licks Callene's mask, then gives it a kiss, leaving her armored mouth ringed with horse grease and spit.

"What is it?" screams the Brazilian physicist.

"We just shot ourselves!" someone cries out.

The audience is too stunned to move.

"How?" the physicist demands. "A mistake—?"

"Sabotage," the general responds. "Somehow, the rebels found a way!"

Then she sees the obvious, too late by a half-second, reaching for a ceremonial firearm worn against her belt.

The captain shoots her through her flash-mask.

Her hidden face shatters, dissolves.

Then he turns, aiming squarely at Kaybecker's forehead.

But Kaybecker is defiant, warning him, "Not if you want to escape, you won't. You need me, you stupid fuck!"

Night returns, at least for the moment. Flash-masks are transparent again, revealing dozens of soldiers running in a ragged row, running toward their captain.

"You don't have time," Kaybecker screams. "That ship will be here in a very few minutes, and then what?"

"You tell me. *What—?*"

"Without my word, they'll circle," says Kaybecker. "And when they see a rebel ship trying to slip down to pick you up—"

"What have you done?" the captain roars.

Callene understands. She steps between them, allowing her small hands to touch the captain, telling him, "It isn't my fault. I don't know how this—"

"This is why I was late to our festivities," Kaybecker confesses.

The captain nearly shoots him. He lifts his weapon a second time, a last thread of discipline stopping him. With a sloppy slow voice, he says, "All right. What do you want?"

"A moment of your time, is all. To talk."

The spiderweb screen comes to life again. The moon is unchanged, unharmed by the latest outrage. But on the earth's dark face, exactly where Seattle should be, a fountain of scalding white light is spreading, setting fire to the land, twenty million killed even before the blast reaches the Pacific Ocean, forcing those cold black waters to boil.

It was astonishingly easy, letting another shape his words and behavior. In public, Kaybecker was the same man that he had always been. But in private, he eagerly obeyed every demand. And in those rare moments of self-reflection, he was awed by Callene's hold on him. His own life had been built on manipulating people, using tiny emotions like pride and fear to motivate. But this was more effective. By a long ways. "If I'd had these biochemical tricks," he told his new captain, "my scientists would have won the war for me by now."

"Maybe yes, maybe no," the captain replied. He and Callene were sitting in Kaybecker's luxurious quarters, every security device deactivated. "Frankly," he admitted, "these techniques don't always work well in others. It just depends."

"On what?"

"Variables," the man replied, a natural arrogance showing. Then he steered the subject elsewhere. "Callene assures me that you've been very helpful."

"Always," the lovesick man replied.

"And she's been rewarding you, has she?"

For some reason, the captain needed reassurance.

"She lets me touch her," Kaybecker confessed. Callene was sitting next to him on the leather sofa. He stared at her perfect face with every eye, and she stared at her captain. "When I do what she wants. . . ."

"What I want," the captain reminded him. "How do you like that magical tit?"

Just thinking about it, he couldn't help but shiver.

Glancing at Callene, the captain gave a smug little wink. "A taste of the sauce helps one remember the meal."

What's *your* sauce? Kaybecker wondered, in secret.

The captain's team was ruled with an economy of potions and devotion: The half dozen women officers watched the arrogant man as if he were God, while each male was enthralled with a single woman. But didn't that make sense? Bringing dozens of infiltrators to the earth, then orchestrating their climb into the same unit, would be impossible. Better to send one agent—perhaps the captain; perhaps someone else—and let that true believer find converts with his or her own magical sauce.

Kaybecker didn't dare ask the godlike man about his origins or the mission.

But when their first meeting was finished, the captain left alone, giving Callene a wink, telling her that Kaybecker deserved his rewards. "For me," he told her. "Would you?"

That's when Kaybecker confessed his curiosity to Callene. He was suckling on the luscious nipple, talking around it and mouthfuls of freshly synthesized microchines, blood-warm narcotics. Her eyes were closed, as always. Surprise showed in the way she closed them even tighter, wincing for just an instant. Then with a sturdy, much-practiced pride, she announced, "I don't know anything about *Him*. I don't need to know. And don't ask questions like that again. All right?"

"All right," he promised. "I won't."

But there was a second Callene—the perfect woman who was the true object of his relentless, pathological love. As promised, Kaybecker could always see her: Awake or asleep, his lidless pineal eye fed him the same powerful image: Her naked, straddling his engorged penis, offering her breast to his grateful mouth, and, in return, demanding nothing. Nothing. That other Callene didn't know about wars and political power. She wasn't the one who ordered him to transfer her old unit down from Seattle. It didn't matter to her if he gave away security codes or the schematics for their newest weapon, or the files about the geniuses who worked for him. And that other Callene never yanked him off her nipple, then told him, "We need everyone outdoors. When that new weapon is used for the first time, we should be somewhere near the beach."

"Outdoors?" he had muttered, in reflex. "But you're safer here. Underground."

"Don't ask me why," the flesh-and-blood Callene growled, black eyes cutting through him. "That's what the captain wants. Believe me."

How could he do anything but believe her?

But that other Callene would answer his questions. She never tired, never went dry, never winced and yanked back her nipple, and she didn't close her eyes so that she could see the perfect captain who inhabited her own secret eye. . . .

What do the rebels want? Kaybecker asked that Callene.

She lent a voice to his intuition. At least one other unit had betrayed the earth, she explained, and those were the gunners who would fire at the moon. Which would be an easy trick, Kaybecker realized. The gun was invisible. It was a weapon that could be turned 180 degrees, and who would know until it was a nanosecond too late. . . . ?

But what about the nuclear bullets? he inquired. Why launch them at the moon?

The UN won't arm them with the usual detonators, she replied. The bullets won't need detonators. Which means that not only will the earth shoot itself, but it will also give away a fat portion of its munitions, for free. . . .

And the geniuses?

Will be taken captive, she said. He sensed. She said, That's why the captain wants them outside, darling. A rescue ship will use the blast and the chaos afterward to come and get us. And really, darling, if you think about it . . . that's going to be the biggest victory of all. Think what those scientists will mean to the rebels. . . .

Kaybecker smiled for a moment. Then with a shudder, asked, But what about me?

What about you?

Will I go with you? To the moon?

She regarded him for a long while, then admitted:

Darling, I can't answer that.

Two days before the blast, Kaybecker overheard several of his physicists talking. It seemed that one of them had stumbled upon their new captain enjoying the company of a female officer. The couple were sandwiched inside a tiny closet. "Enjoying an elaborate embrace," the witness claimed, illustrating the pose with his body and two hands, holding an imaginary head just so. Then he looked up, noticing the project manager standing nearby. And he suddenly laughed, with a malicious air, and Kaybecker knew just which officer had been sucking off that arrogant bastard.

Kaybecker fell into a wild panic.

Approaching the flesh-and-blood Callene, he asked if they would indeed remain together, always.

She didn't hesitate.

"Of course," she told him. "Wherever we go, you'll be with me." Then with a strange unconscious grin, she closed her glass eyes.

The captain was equally reassuring. "You've been an enormous help. We're indebted to you. So of course we're going to take care of you. Of course."

Anyone else would have believed those comforting words.

But until lately, Kaybecker was utterly undistracted by love. More than anyone else in this insidious operation, he was possessed by the apparition in his secret eye. Closing his other eyes, he could see nothing but his only love, and, without warning, her expression changed, suddenly glaring at him.

What's wrong? he whispered.

They won't take you with them, she replied. And you know they won't. You've known it from the beginning. . . .

Kaybecker nodded grimly, admitting the caustic truth.

Then the captain suddenly appeared, swaggering up to them, wearing nothing, invading his mind's eye without the slightest care; and suddenly Kaybecker's ethereal Callene took hold of the captain's long brown penis, lifting it to her mouth as she dismissed Kaybecker with a sneer, telling him:

You're a monster.

Kaybecker screamed, in agony.

A monster, she repeated, and if I have the chance, I'll kill you myself. . . .

With powerful eyes, Callene watches Kaybecker and her captain. They talk for less than a minute, yet it feels like hours. "You're crazy," says her captain. "That's fucking madness! I won't!" But then Kaybecker says something else, motioning at the sky, and her captain starts shaking his head, turning now, looking at Callene for a half-instant before he tells several other officers, "Come here. And listen."

Moments later, Callene is grabbed from behind. Then, disarmed.

In a blur of motion, she is led across the meadow. Seattle is a brilliant, ravaged glow, the plasma wall spreading south, bearing down on them. What's happening? Part of her knows everything, and the rest denies it. The rest is what makes her close her eyes, stumbling moments later. Then a big hand takes her by the arm and lifts, guiding her along, Kaybecker's smooth, elated voice telling her, "You saw how easily he did it. Selling you out like this. Without half a fight, even."

She is crying, and has been crying for some time now.

"Once we're inside, and safe," says Kaybecker, "I'll order that Jaguar to save itself. 'We're all underground,' I'll tell it. 'We can weather the storm from here.'"

She opens her eyes, too late. It's just the two of them beneath the ancient firs, the cliff before them, the meadow behind them empty. Her cap-

tain has already vanished, which isn't possible. Isn't. He's just waiting for Kaybecker to call off the hyperplane, and then he'll come back to save her . . . which is the only way she can keep walking . . . telling herself that the mission depends on her seeing that Kaybecker does what he promised to do. . . .

"And we will weather this storm," promises the monster. "The food reserves can keep us fat for a thousand years, and there's plenty of bottled power. . . ."

She tries to speak, but she has no voice.

"It might be months before anyone bothers digging down to us. If they ever try. The casualties, the damage, the future changes in climate . . . this world's going to be too fucking busy to concern itself with a bunch of empty, ruined labs. . . ."

She takes a silent vow: If her captain can't save her, whatever the reason, she will murder Kaybecker herself, then throw herself down an empty shaft.

"Look what else I got from him," says the monster. "The extras he kept close, in case his originals malfunctioned."

A pair of oblong machines lie in his hand. For an instant, Callene thinks they're artificial eyes. Then, realizing her mistake, she turns, trying to run.

Kaybecker anticipates her, grabbing her, pocketing his plastic testicles as he drags her to the camouflaged entranceway. Armor doors lift for the them, then drop again. With a word, he causes them to weld themselves in place, with a sizzling roar. Then he punches out a coded signal on the first comppad, and, with a quiet happy voice, he says, "See? Your people get what they want, and I get what I want. What I deserve."

She doesn't have the strength to fight anymore.

"He never loved you," Kaybecker maintains. "But *I* do. *I* do. And once the autodocs get these little boys implanted inside me—"

"I won't," she promises, in a low, desperate whisper.

That makes him laugh.

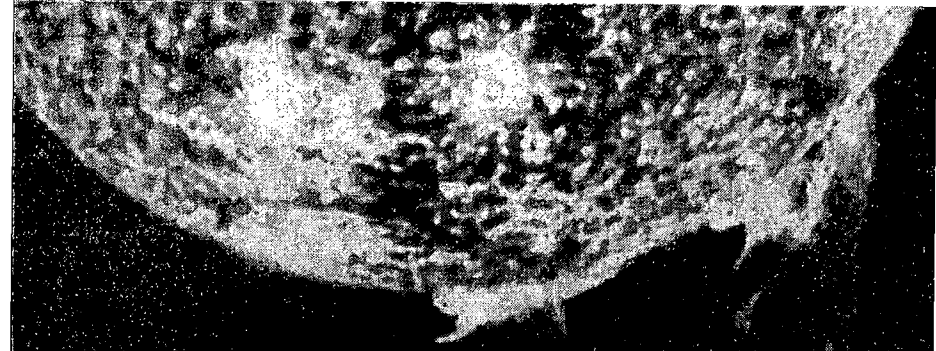
"You know how it feels. What I can give you." He's pulling her along the softly lit passageway, approaching the next set of doors. "Just think what it's going to be like. Two people, any people, who can feel that way toward one another. . . ."

"How long can you fight that sort of temptation, sweetheart. . . ?"

"A week? A day?"

"A nanosecond, is my guess. . . !"

Callene shrieks, and with her free hand begins to pull out gouts of her black hair, then bloody patches of her scalp, trying desperately to claw her way inside her own skull, wanting nothing but to blind the lidless eye within— ●



IN THE STAR'S MOUTH

Beyond the rim where the stars go dim and
Time starts swirling slow,
when you've lost all doubt you can get back out
but hope it isn't so,
when you've gone too far down the throat of the
star to ever pull free again
and you watch pure Force without remorse
congealing Where and When

when you know your lover will never recover
your bones for an Earthly grave,
when hope gets lost and it all turns Cost,
and there's nothing left to save
when death's so near you've lost your fear and
want to give it voice
but you know even light can't escape this Might
and all they'll ever hear is noise,

then let your boosters fire,
turn death into desire,
headlong careen down your final scream
cry, "Life was a wild and wonderful dream!
Let's die alive, if die we must,
I'd rather burn up than rust!
I'd rather burn up than rust!"

—W. Gregory Stewart

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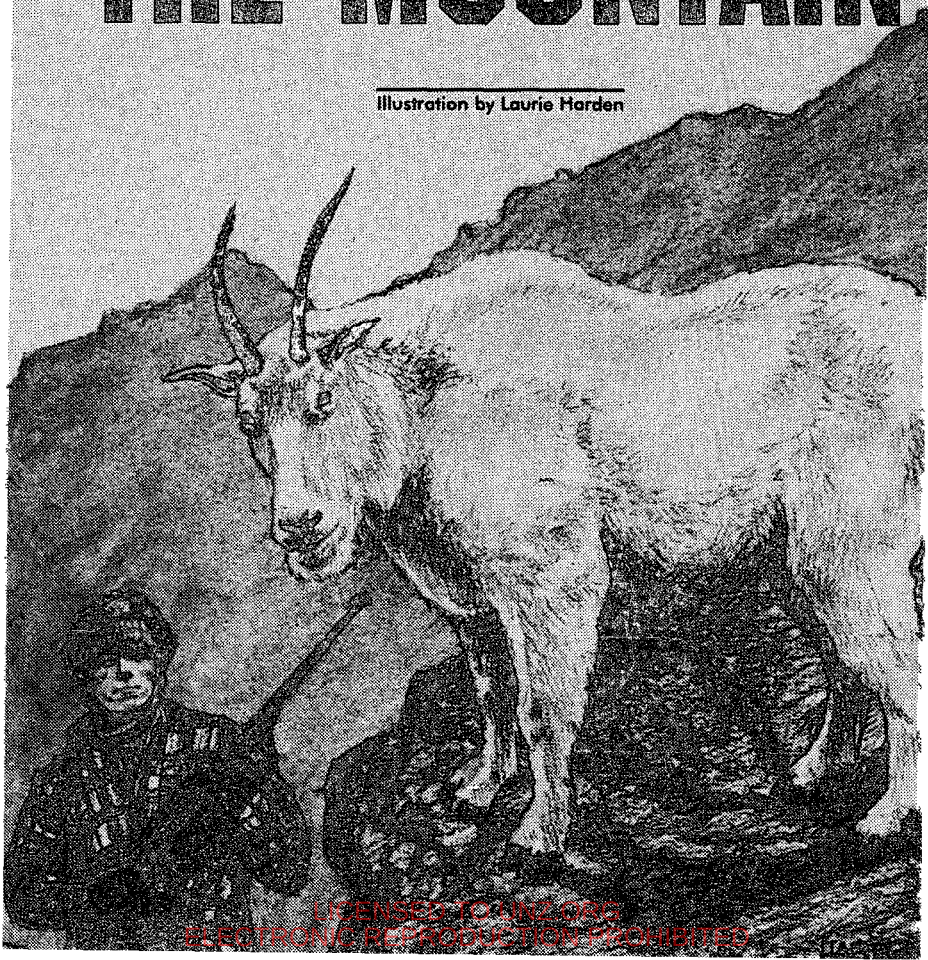


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James Sarafin

SHADOWS ON THE MOUNTAIN

Illustration by Laurie Harden



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October/November 1997

In the past couple of years, James Sarafin's fiction credits have included sales to *Asimov's*, *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, and *VB Tech Journal*. His fantasy/crime story in the July 1995 issue of *Hitchcock*, "The Word for Breaking August Sky," won a national contest sponsored by Nan A. Talese/Doubleday and judged by Pulitzer prize-winner Alison Lurie. The tale also won the 1996 Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for best first mystery story. He returns to our pages now with a story that utilizes the wildness and mystery of his home state, Alaska.

"We can get back in there, kill a couple, then come out in a week, ten days at most," Davis said. His map was spread between us, at lunch in a restaurant on the ground floor of a downtown Anchorage hotel. It covered the whole table, dangling almost to my lap. Davis's arms pinned it down; his hands lay across my side of the table. I leaned back with my arms crossed.

It was driving the waiter crazy, that map. He'd brought the bread basket and butter dish, waiting pointedly for us to make enough space to set them down. Davis lifted one arm and shoved the map over with the other, clearing maybe four inches on the table edge. He looked tired, like he'd been out late.

The waiter looked toward the front register; a corner of his mouth twitched. Davis didn't budge further or even look up. Finally the waiter set down the basket and dish and pushed gingerly into the map. When he let go the map recoiled, shoving the basket to the edge. The waiter and I watched, expecting to see it fall. Davis just continued his spiel.

"No one's hunted back there for years. Too much of a hike, and the weather off the glacier keeps those mountains too socked in most of the time to fly. Believe me, this is the place to go for a record-book billy."

I sat there with my arms crossed and barely nodded. Cindy was right—no way he was going to let me out of it, after we'd drawn those Fish and Game permits.

"Strange goats though," he went on. "Atypical trophies, because of their head shape. I saw one of the few ever taken out of there on an old guide's wall, and he had a tall tale to go with it. Claimed the goat was charging him when he shot it."

The waiter stood to take our lunch orders, his mouth trying not to twitch. Davis finally folded up the map. We finished eating and argued briefly over the check, but he paid.

"You look beat, Bruce," he said, when we went out on the street. "You're in good shape, right?" Cause this is going to be one tough mother of a hunt. We've got to carry all our gear and food on our backs, plus the meat and capes coming out."

"I don't go to a health club, Rick, but I work on my feet all day." As soon as I spoke I realized that my last remaining bit of pride had just foreclosed a possible way out.

"I'll see you at my place, Saturday morning at seven."

I watched him cross the street to go back to his office, and he and the crosswalk began to tilt. It happened as the crosswalk sign started blinking red, "DON'T WALK." Everything kept tilting to the left, the crosswalk, street, and Davis going vertical on me, the ground turning into a wall for at least the dozenth time in the past week. I held myself against the side of the hotel to keep from flying down the street, maybe all the way into Cook Inlet. Watching Davis grow smaller, shoulders held back and hands swinging free from his sides in that weightlifter's walk.

What was wrong with me? The doctor I'd seen that morning couldn't find anything physical, and ended up asking if I was under stress and how I had been sleeping lately. Sleeping?—I'd almost laughed. But he was just a GP, and maybe he'd missed it, some obscure disorder like a brain tumor maybe, that was sending warning signals before it killed me.

I slumped against the building and closed my eyes, and when at last the world swung back as it was supposed to be I was lying there with my legs out on the sidewalk, like a street drunk. Why hadn't I left my hand sticking out too?—maybe I would have collected a few bucks. Maybe enough to pay my parking ticket.

Kachemak Bay lay flat as a mirror under motionless low clouds all the way across from Homer. Davis cut the outboard at the end of the long cove and let the swells of our wake overtake us, rocking the bow of his Zodiac onto the beach. We raised the outboard, dropped the transom wheels, and dragged the boat up the beach, which was made of flat stones, mostly shale, worn smooth by the tides. The stones clattered and crunched as we dug in, pulling the boat.

In a hundred yards the beach ended at the exposed roots of giant spruce trees. I heard an eagle cry, taking flight, but I missed seeing him before he was gone into the clouds. We were completely alone; no fishing boats worked the water, and we'd passed the last cabin out near the entrance to the cove. The air was still and the only sound came from our boat's final swells dying on the beach. I watched Davis tie the boat to a huge old spruce, maybe six feet in diameter at the trunk.

"We're making good time, so far," he said.

I lifted my pack, rifle lashed to one side, out of the boat. "Let's go bag those goats and get out of here."

"All I want is a snow-white ten-incher." He laughed. "Of course, that's what *she* said."

"Who?" I hadn't meant to say it so sharply, or even to ask it at all.

He looked away. "My wife. When she married me." I could feel his eyes come back as I shifted my pack higher and adjusted the straps. "Lighten up, Bruce. Let's have some fun here."

We started into the old-growth forest. Davis had a new pair of plastic mountaineering boots that squeaked as he walked. For the first mile we followed a bear trail along a small, twisting stream that emptied into the cove. When the trail ran out, we sought clearings and game trails where we could, and otherwise thrashed through spruce, alder, and devil's club thickets.

Davis liked to lead. When he picked a bad route I found my own for a while, but had to fall in behind him soon enough, the way his long, powerful legs covered ground. After a few hours I just trudged along and watched his back. Thrashing through alders, watching his back. Crossing streams, climbing gullies, watching his back. What if I tripped? Another hunter accidentally shot by his partner. Gun just went off. . . .

"You've got to go," she'd told me. "You committed to it months ago, and the mountains are too dangerous for him to go by himself." She was touching up her eyelashes at her vanity mirror in our bathroom. "He *is* my boss."

I had committed months ago, when I knew nothing. I'd gone after work to meet her and some people from her office in a downtown bar. I felt out of place as I approached their table, with the other men in their suits and blow-dried hair. She sat against the wall beside Rick Davis, investment banker, one of the bank's vice-presidents. The others greeted me politely, and Davis was friendly, effusive. I put my hand on Cindy's arm and leaned forward for a kiss. She laughed and shied away, letting me peck her on the cheek, looking down at my hands and checking her blouse sleeve.

I worked as a house painter. I could never clean it all off after a day's work; there were always stains left under the nails and in the lines of my hands. And Cindy seemed to be checking my hands a lot lately.

I had a beer. Rick kept ordering pepper vodka martinis and buying rounds for the group. I dug out a twenty, but he wouldn't let me buy. He started talking about big game, and Cindy mentioned that I liked to hunt.

"Well, you may be in luck, Bruce." His face was flushed by then. "I've lined up a killer goat hunt, and need a partner. What're you doing the last week of September?"

I shrugged. Painting work usually slacked off around then, when the weather started to go rainy and cold. But Alaskan hunting was expensive, not like the deer hunting I'd grown up with in Wisconsin.

"We don't even have to pay an air taxi. We can get there in my boat." Like he'd read my mind. "We've got to apply by tomorrow—it's a drawing permit area. Odds aren't good, but I'll pay the application fee. All you've got to do is sign the form."

We got drawn. And now she was in the bathroom, putting on makeup, saying, brightly, "Oh, just go! You'll have a good time." She came into our bedroom, wearing her best sweater and jeans, and a pearl necklace I'd never seen before, looking so good I could die.

The floor started to tilt, going vertical on me, and I leaned back against the wall. I couldn't tell her why I didn't want to go on the hunt, because everything would come apart.

"I'm going out with Carol, probably won't be back 'til late. Don't worry, we'll take a cab if we drink too much." She kissed me deeply and held me close. "What's the matter, honey, still don't feel good? Why don't you see a doctor?"

From the window I watched her get in the car. She looked happy. When she'd driven off, I measured away from the window frame along the wall. Then I punched it as hard as I could, breaking through the sheetrock. My hand came out still in a fist, dragging chunks of plaster that fell to the carpet. I licked the re-opened cut on my big knuckle and gradually released the fist. It hurt good. But one of these times my luck would run out, and I'd hit a stud behind the sheetrock.

I patched the hole with joint tape and compound, waited until it dried, and painted it to match the wall. I knew my work; I could hardly find the other places in the walls myself. The vacuum picked up the plaster fragments from the carpet, and the open window let out the latex fumes. Maybe that was why the floor was tilting on me—all those years of breathing paint and clean-up fumes. I decided to see the doctor tomorrow morning; maybe he'd say I was too sick to go hunting.

If not, at noon I'd go meet Davis in the restaurant, to make our plans. If I did go hunting, at least I'd know where he was. As long as I didn't open it up and could keep patching, it might all hold together. And maybe one time when I checked it wouldn't be there, like a dream. Be like it was before, with Cindy and I.

Or maybe one of us wouldn't come back from the hunt.

We camped the first night near a small lake about five miles from the coast. Davis had brought a tent, but I said I wanted to sleep under the stars. The night was cold and clear, and I lay in the bag watching my breath plume toward the sky. I had been born with perfect vision, and spent many a summer night as a kid on our lawn in that Madison suburb looking for constellations and the early satellites. Now, far from any interference from city lights, I could see the universe with clarity and depth. To the north and west the aurora trickled pale green streamers

overhead, and in other directions I found familiar constellations as well as star clusters I had never seen. I fell asleep counting satellites passing overhead.

Traveling was easier the second day, further from the coastal underbrush, and after the first good night's sleep I'd had in days. We skirted the north end of the lake and came to a broad, rocky streambed coming down the valley. The glacier-tinged stream ran low, banks scattered with rotting pink salmon carcasses. We made good time staying on the streambed.

The mountains ahead, which from the sea had looked low and gentle, grew steep and imposing, rising straight out of the valley without foothills. We came within half a mile of the mountain to the south when I spotted white specks in a patch of green, high up.

"Aren't those goats?"

Davis looked up and I could tell from his silence I was right. A flash of what looked like disappointment crossed his face: that I had been the first to spot game. He reached over his shoulder, unzipped a pack pocket, and took out his binoculars.

"Yeah, but they're not ours," he said, after studying them a moment. "I don't see any real good horns up there."

"If they're legal, why go any further?" I wanted to get this over with.

"That's what everyone else says, so these goats here get picked over every year. The ones we want are back in, near the glacier to the north there." He pointed to the edge of blue-tinged ice showing from the head of the valley.

Clouds covered the sun by noon. We had made a few miles up the valley, and were looking for a place to climb. Davis kept walking slower, studying the mountain to the north. The glacier at the head of the valley grew larger, filling the top of the steep bowl ahead. If we kept following the stream we'd have no choice but to climb straight up to that mass of ice. Davis finally stopped.

"God, we'd need rock gear for most of this, and all I brought was a hundred feet of climbing ribbon. But it looks like we might be able to walk up here."

I'd never tried to climb such an abrupt mountain. It started at about forty degrees right out of the stream bank and only seemed to get steeper above the alders. Most of it showed sheer rock face, but the stretch above us held the green of vegetation going up out of sight. A tiny spring ran out of the mountain's base there, so I filled my water bottle.

"Why bother?" Davis said. "There's a snowfield just over the top, according to the map. We should make it before dark."

I wasn't so sure, but his canteen was his business. We started up, fighting for a route through the alders.

Just above the trees, below a huge rock sticking like a wart out of the

grassy slope, we found the crypt. What I saw, first, was a tattered strip of faded tarp hanging over a low cave at the base of the rock. Stooping carefully under the weight of my pack, I looked inside. A corroded pack-frame lay near the entrance of the shallow cave. As my eyes adjusted, I saw a human skull and bones lying in the back.

"Jesus—" I started to say.

"God, look at those horns!" Davis shook loose of his pack and crawled into the cave. He came out just as quickly, dragging something. "This ain't a goat, it's a damned African oryx!"

I didn't know much about goats, but this one's horns and skull looked huge, and oddly misshapen; instead of running straight back from the nose, the cranium bulged behind the horns, canting them forward slightly.

"Can I pick a hunting spot, or what?" Davis said.

"There's a dead man back there, Rick." Reluctantly, I shed my own pack and crawled in, careful of where I placed my hands. There's something disturbing about touching an old animal bone, as if your skin fears the contagion of death; I knew human bones would be worse. Less than half the man's skeleton was there, the rest probably scattered by animals. A few rusted camping implements lay in the leaves and debris on the floor, but every bit of fabric must have rotted away or been taken by ground squirrels to line their nests. The air smelled dank and musty, and I wanted out of there very badly.

I was backing away when I noticed the scratching on the rock face above the skull. I rubbed away the lichen cover until I could read:

CUB BLOWN OFF MOUNTAIN ONTO
GLACIER BRUNNER KILLED OFF CLIFF
BY DEVILS I GOT HORNED IN THE GUT
CANT WALK GUESS DAMN DEVILS GOT
ME TOO
SEP 14 '67 JONATHAN HAYES

"Hayes was a guide," Davis said, when I was back outside. "I think I read about him. He disappeared with a client in his Super Cub. Everyone figured it was just another plane crash no one would ever find."

"What do you think he meant about 'devils'?"

"He must have fallen on this trophy he took; and got delirious before he died. A gut wound like that would cause a raging infection. What a way to go."

"We'd better get out of here and report this."

"Hell, we can do that after the hunt. He's been here twenty-five years, another week won't hurt him."

I now had a good reason to call off the hunt, and we argued for some

time. But Davis was unrelenting, and eventually I gave up; we shouldered our packs and continued the climb.

I didn't look at him or think about anything but the steady toil, where I'd next put my feet or hands. We had trouble getting toeholds in the slick grass, and whenever I slipped I usually wound up grabbing hold of a thorn bush. By late afternoon the air grew still under the clouds, and we were attacked by small biting flies, red bodies showing like dull rubies under flat wings. The only way to swat them, hanging on to the mountain, trying to climb, was to wait until several started feasting on my hand, then smash them against my forehead. The flies stayed with us until the temperature dropped at dusk.

A mountain, I learned, only seems to grow as you climb it; when you think the top is where the mountain disappears above, you find it is only the next crest; and when at last you see the true summit ending in a jagged line in the sky, it is still farther than it looks. Darkness fell, and we finally came to a narrow shelf formed at the base of two marmot holes, and set up the tent with two corners hanging steeply downslope. A coin flip left me with the downhill side.

We had been sweating hard all afternoon and hadn't crossed a spring or patch of snow since starting up. I took a long drink from my water bottle, and saw him trying not to look.

"Didn't you bring any water, Rick?" I said. "Do you need some of mine?"

He wanted to say no, but I held out the open bottle and he finally took it. He wasn't greedy, but between the two of us the bottle was almost empty when he handed it back. Without enough water to cook, we ate dried fruit and candy bars for dinner.

In the tent, the mountain fell away from the narrow shelf right at the middle of my back. I fought that slope to stay in place, hearing him breathe deeper into sleep. And it was like trying to sleep next to her at home, only worse. I tried not to think, but it was too late and I started to. If she heard him breathe like that—did they ever sleep? Next to him—where?

He was six or seven years older than me, around forty, but they say women like older men. I thought how nice it would be to punch him in the nose, make the blood and tears run out of him. But he had three inches and thirty pounds on me; I'd probably regret it. Probably worth it though. He couldn't mess me up too bad, or he'd have to carry me out of here. Sure put a quick end to this damned hunt.

My mind kept thinking and I couldn't turn it off. Then I could feel it start to go back home, to our home, getting even worse, so I stopped and brought it back onto the mountain. I tried to think about the stars, imagining I could see them above my face, right through the tent and cloud cover. After a long time it began to rain lightly. I could hear the little drops patting the nylon and I tried to think of the drops as stars, that I was flying through them so fast they blurred like rain.

And a little later, early in the morning, the mountain seemed to tilt back the other way, grew level, and I fell asleep.

We were in the seedy little office I worked out of in south Anchorage, and she was arguing with Dick Miller about me. I was hanging back, just wanting to get in the truck and go to a job. But she was arguing, saying I'd worked for him eleven years now, that I handled most of the tough jobs myself, that my work made the company's reputation. She was saying I deserved a share of the business, that he should make me a partner. That I wasn't going to settle for being just a house-painter, working for someone else, the rest of my life.

She had never actually said those things, even to me. But it came to me in a dream that night.

In the morning the most important thing was that a small quantity of rainwater had collected uphill in a fold in the tent. We drank every drop, and climbed that morning sipping from tiny pools on flat rocks, never mind the dirt, until they all evaporated. Now and then we passed ripe blueberries, and I'd pop them and burst them in my mouth, savoring the single tinted drop. The blueberries were probably what kept me going.

Above the bush-line, where the only vegetation left was alpine tundra, we saw the goats. Scattered all across the mountain—white shapes that weren't there, then suddenly were the next time we looked up. We counted them: eleven, twelve, fourteen. Davis put the glasses on them and grew excited.

"A couple look as good as that one Hayes got!" He let me look and I checked the goats, one by one.

"They've spotted us. Aren't we going to spook them?"

"Goats don't spook like sheep. They'll get out of our way, but they shouldn't go too far."

There was something about the scene that was spooking me. Every one I put the glasses on was looking straight back, standing or lying immobile among the rocks, eyes glinting like black marbles. The strangest thing was how they had all sprung up at once, in scattered ones or twos across nearly a mile of mountain peaks, all watching us. By the time we reached the top that afternoon they had disappeared.

"Where's the snowfield?" I asked, as we crossed over to look down at the northern face. All I could see was rock, dirt, and scattered dull patches of two-inch tundra.

"I don't know. It should be here." We re-checked our position against the map. Sure enough, it showed a permanent snowfield filling the ravine below us. Now bone dry. We pitched camp there on the ridge, beside a rock outcropping.

"I bet it was that volcano that erupted last spring," I said. "It dumped

ash all around here. The ash probably absorbed the sun all summer, and melted away the snowfield."

"Maybe. We can't be on the wrong damn mountain."

Neither of us wanted to eat. When you're real thirsty you can no more think of swallowing food than sand, your tongue feels like a piece of tree bark stuck in your mouth, and your head grows very light. We had to find water before dark, and decided to split up, Davis going west and I east along the ridge.

As I skirted the top of the ravine I saw something out of place below: a twisted hunk of metal that had to be a plane crash. Wings and tail gone, so a bad one. Alaska's wilderness hides many secrets, some old and some new, more than a few involving aircraft fallen from the sky. It couldn't be Hayes's Super Cub, because his note said that it had blown onto the glacier. Maybe someone else's bones still lay in what was left of the cabin. I was too tired and dehydrated to climb down there to check.

I walked slowly under my near-empty pack so I wouldn't sweat away more water. The south face we'd climbed began falling off in sheer rocky cliffs. Far below, the stream ran foaming white and cool. Ahead the glacier filled half the horizon, but on the other side of a drop almost as steep. I could see a few waterfalls cascading down the surrounding mountains, but they were even more distant.

As I walked the ridge narrowed, until the north and south mountain faces were separated by less than fifty feet. Water was the only thing on my mind, when I saw a goat standing on the ridge three hundred yards ahead, looking at me. He was in range, but all I could think was that he might lead me to water.

Both of us froze, and as I waited an image sprang into my mind, of a shadowy mountain slope dropping to a wide valley. And a snowfield in a steep ravine just below. The image faded as the goat moved, disappearing over the edge of the mountain's southern face. When I reached that spot I saw a cliff of ragged, crumbly rock, so steep that if I jumped I wouldn't have hit anything for five hundred feet. But no sign of the goat, not even, as I half-expected, a white shape smashed in the rocks below.

I looked around, trying to find a scene that matched the image of the snowfield that had filled my head moments ago. I didn't know if ESP was real, but I'd had hunches that came true. The sun was setting to the southwest, brightly lighting this rocky face, so none of it seemed right. I crossed the ridge to the other side and knew it had to be this way. Though not as steep, shadows covered the mountain's northern face; but the scene still didn't quite match that image. A little further—I moved up the ridge until I saw the snow-filled ravine several hundred feet below.

The top of the ravine was covered with fine scree and dirt, growing rockier further down. I followed a rough trail cut by many hooves. When I reached the snow I lit my white gas stove and opened my aluminum

kettle. The narrow snowfield ran from a few inches at the top to many feet thick further down, where the ravine grew deeper and less exposed to the sun. The snow, I found as I tried to scoop it up, was actually hard, milky ice, granular and sun-rofsted only on the top surface. I broke chunks free with a rock and let them melt on the stove. My hands, swollen by flies and thorns, stung from handling the sharp, cold pieces of ice.

I drank the kettle dry and melted more ice, throwing the larger chunks in my pack. When I had enough water to fill my bottle, I struggled into the pack. Climbing was hard up the soft, yielding scree, so I angled across the slope toward camp. The heavy load of ice dragged on my shoulders, and chilly meltwater began to drip under my wool pants. I rounded the mountain into a sharp wind and immediately saw the blue tent on the ridgeline, higher up and a thousand yards off. The most direct approach took me across and up the broad ravine, near the wreck, and curiosity made me stop, despite the darkening sky.

The metal hulk was about the size of a small plane, though unrecognizable as any aircraft, its surface weathered the same dull gray as the rocks, no breaks or tears showing where wings or tail had ripped off. No scattered bits of metal or debris as usually accompanied a plane wreck. The thing lay intact—crumpled and flattened, but in one piece, and there was no sign of any windows, doors, or openings. When I touched it, I found it was not aluminum, for its surface was as hard and unyielding as the rocks too. I couldn't scratch it, but it made a dull hollow sound when struck. I realized that, where it lay, it must have been scoured and crushed by the normal snowfield for a long time. It made no sense, being there like that, whatever it was.

When I reached camp, I dumped the ice in a plastic garbage bag. No sign of Davis and it was almost dark. Some big mountain hunter, needing me to find water. It was pretty hard to get lost or miss someone on the bare mountain, and I decided to go tell him he could stop looking.

I found him only a short distance west, where the mountain slanted down toward the coast, stooped over a white blotch in the darkness. He'd made a kill.

"Eleven and a half inches," he said. "Unbelievable, for a nanny." It was legal to shoot either sex, but he sounded disappointed he hadn't shot a billy goat.

"I didn't even hear the shot. I must have been pounding on the ice then."

He looked at me, started to lick his lips, then stopped.

"Need some water, Rick?" I asked.

"God, I'm so thirsty I thought I would drink her blood." There was a dark bloody patch near his mouth, but he may have just wiped it there with his hand. I gave him the bottle and he drank half, then looked at me.

"Go ahead. I found enough for camp."

The goat scent was musky and strong, overpowering even the smell of the opened body cavity, as I helped him finish boning the meat. He had already removed the cape and head.

"She was crossing the ridge, maybe four hundred yards ahead, and just stopped to look at me," he said. "Lucky for me—mountain goats can climb anything, and you usually have to shoot them off a cliff. I didn't cape her all the way, 'cause my taxidermist will have to see that skull to believe it."

By the time we reached camp we were struggling through night, into the teeth of a strong, cold headwind. We found shelter behind the outcropping to cook our freeze-dried dinners. We both felt good to be warm, filled, and watered, and Davis brought out a flask of single malt whiskey. I mentioned the strange wreck I'd found in the ravine, and he speculated that it might be something military. After a while he made a comment about his wife, so I asked how long they'd been married.

"Fifteen years." He laughed into the dark, cloudy sky; the whiskey, taking hold. "Hard to believe."

"Got any kids?"

"Three. All girls."

From our campsite the mountain dropped gradually to the west, and I could see the lights of Homer running out in a narrow, crooked line on the long spit across the bay. The lights twinkled from the distance. A nearly full moon hung just above the mountain to the south. I handed back his flask.

"Must be hard, leaving them to come out here like this."

"Oh, I don't know. The girls are big now. They don't run into my arms when I come home anymore, just sit there in front of the TV."

"What about your wife—don't you miss her?"

He tilted back the flask, then wiped his mouth. "Isn't like it used to be. I don't think couples are necessarily supposed to stay together their whole lives. Serial monogamy, that's the natural way. Sometimes people just outgrow each other, you know?"

My mouth was as dry as before the water, but something—maybe it was the whiskey or maybe it was always having to give him water—wouldn't let me stop. "You sound like you're thinking about a divorce."

"Yeah, I think that's actually in the cards. The girls are old enough to handle it, and I'd pay support and go for joint custody." He hid his eyes behind another tilt of the flask. "How're you and Cindy doing?"

Right then it all flooded in, through a dam that failed without warning: fragments and phrases of the telephone message I had been blocking for almost two weeks—his voice, speaking in close, intimate terms—how great last night had been, something about finding a house for them to live in.

I had no idea they were doing it until I came home early from a week-

end fishing trip and heard the message on the machine. And now, sitting on the moonlit mountain with the wind moaning over the rocks and the clouds rushing close overhead, he saw it, the knowledge, written in my devastated face or maybe the slump of my shoulders or the wrack of my whole body.

He was stunned. They must have talked about it before the hunt, she must have told him I hadn't a clue. No other way would he have put himself way back on this mountain, alone with me.

"Are you sure you came out here to kill a *goat*, Bruce?" For the first time, I heard a quaver in his voice and saw a trace of uncertainty, if not fear, on his face. I remained silent, wondering what else I might see. He put the flask away and dragged his gun into the tent behind him. I could hear the double metal clink of the bolt chambering a round.

"You going to sleep under the stars?" The false security of the tent must have brought the confident tone back in his voice.

"I guess." There were no stars, only clouds scudding low overhead. I moved my gear up the mountain, behind the next outcropping, better sheltered and out of hearing of his tent flapping in the wind. The ground tilted vertical, then further, and I wanted to be sick, as the moment's satisfaction gave way to the abiding knowledge of his confirmation.

They were really doing it, it was really true then.

And now that I had done it, brought it out in the open and was sure not to get any sleep, would the ground stay tilted all the time? How could I make it down the mountain if it did? Maybe it didn't matter anymore.

All night the wind attacked in rushes down the ridgeline. I could hear the fiercer onslaughts coming before they hit, roaring down the mountain from the glacier, then suddenly upon me, swirling gusts that pierced my bag through the zipper and seams. Near morning scattered drops of rain came flying with the wind. I lay huddled in the damp bag, waiting for the sky to show a light enough gray to get up.

The stove lit reluctantly in the cold wind, but I was finally able to warm my fingers and set the kettle to boil. When I stood up toward the camp, the tent was gone. No sign of Davis except his pack, where he'd left it behind a rock, and one of those green plastic boots sticking out on the duller tundra, twenty yards further down the ridge.

Surprise turned into a vast relief: he was gone. I imagined the conversation at home. Sorry, Cindy. Went hunting and lost your boss. No, I didn't fire a shot—look, there's still gun oil in my barrel. The wind just blew him off the mountain.

It was still blowing hard enough almost to believe it, pushing against the back of my parka like a giant hand. But the wind wasn't blowing me off the mountain; it must have taken only the tent. So what happened to Davis? As I moved closer I saw an aluminum stake pulled out of the ground and the tent site churned by cloven hooves.

Looked like a herd of goats had . . . attacked the tent? I hadn't heard a thing over the roar of the wind.

Tracking was tough on the spongy tundra, hard rock, and windswept patches of dirt, but I saw more objects, another tent stake, a flashlight, a sock snagged behind a rock, leading down the gradual slope to the west. A picture was forming of Davis, grabbing maybe his rifle, jacket, and boots, running out of the tent and dropping one boot before he could put it on.

Slowly, I covered a few hundred yards, here and there finding a broken patch of tundra, a few partial hoofprints. I straightened once to check the barren mountain top and determine the direction of travel. The trail angled toward the steep cliffs on the southern face. Running in the dark, Davis probably couldn't tell where he was headed. Sure enough, the trail ended right at the edge.

Bad luck, Cindy. Your boyfriend got panicked by some goats and ran off a cliff.

I stuck my head over the edge and spotted him lying on a ledge maybe thirty feet down, the only thing that had kept him from falling further. He was alive and saw me, moved, and I caught the gleam of his scope as his rifle came up. I just stood there dumbfounded while he aimed and fired, but luckily he couldn't shoot straight, lying on his back with the wind blowing his arms around. The bullet whapped air near my left ear, and I ducked back from the edge.

My God, there's nothing like a bullet going by to get your blood pumping on a cold morning! When I calmed down, I called out for him to stop, but the wind snatched away my words as soon as they left my mouth. I chanced another peek. This time he had braced himself, and the bullet hit the edge next to my foot, sending rock fragments stinging into my face. He shouted; all I caught was my name.

Pretty clear he hadn't mistaken me for a goat. But it was also clear, from the two glimpses I'd had, that he was badly hurt, lying in the rocks with his leg twisted and bent sharply at the wrong angle. No way to help him without drawing another bullet, though, even if I could get down that cliff. I walked back to camp and re-lit the stove, sitting on a mound of tundra.

Well, I wouldn't be the first hunter whose partner fell off a cliff up here—just ask old Hayes down in that cave. All I had to do was get off the mountain and back to the boat. Downhill, I could probably make it by tomorrow evening if I started now. I thought about leaving Davis on that ledge. No way he could get down with a broken leg. No water or food, his sleeping bag blown away with the tent, and the temperature seemed to be dropping. And what about the goats who had chased him there? That didn't make sense, unless they were disease-mad. Could goats get rabies? Would they come back?

Whatever, I'd walk down the mountain, back to the boat, and run across to Homer. When I got there, I'd have to report Davis. Just that he fell off a cliff—couldn't mention the goats, they'd never believe it. I didn't believe it myself. Maybe what actually happened was Davis got up to take a leak, the tent blew off, and he fell chasing it in the dark. The goats just wandered through later on. Anyway, that's what I'd say I thought happened. They'd send out a rescue helicopter, me along to show where he was. Three days, he wouldn't be alive. They'd investigate. So why hadn't I been in the tent with him?

Yeah, officer, I guess I *did* know he was fucking my wife before I went hunting with him.

Then, to her: I'm sorry, your lover didn't come back. Or: your boss—still ignorant-like. If I could still play it that way. Not a chance. Why didn't he fall all the way down?

But he didn't. I finished breakfast and packed my gear, dumping everything out of his pack except the canteen and that roll of nylon climbing ribbon. I tied his pack to the outside of mine and started down the mountain the way we'd come up.

I couldn't see Davis because of a rocky outcropping between us, but when I figured I'd dropped below his position I angled in that direction. Pretty soon I needed all four limbs for finding a lateral route. Sometimes I would follow a ledge or crack for a few yards, then it would peter out and I'd be left to scramble with fingers and toes over the crumbly rock face.

The rock face grew smoother and steeper, until I came to a place where the rock was split by a wide vertical crack. As I searched for a way across I heard a shot, and flinched before I realized he wasn't shooting at me. Cautiously, I moved forward, and spotted Davis's position on the ledge, a few hundred yards further and slightly higher, from a flicker of movement as he lowered the rifle.

At the same time I saw the goats. Four, no five, standing on the near-vertical rock face, suspended as if defying gravity, in various positions around Davis, though concealed by the uneven rock to be out of gun-sight. As I watched, one of the goats shifted position, ambling as unconcernedly as a cow in a level field, only the rock fragments tumbling away from its hooves revealing any difference. Looking at them standing and moving like that made the cliff itself seem unreal, as if the rock weren't really vertical at all, or the goats had turned it horizontal for only themselves.

But I wasn't a goat. As I saw Davis and thought about what I was doing, the mountain seemed to tilt forward on me, leaning over, vertical then past vertical. I closed my eyes and hung on. The mountain only leaned further, and I could feel my hands and feet start to slip.

What a fool. Risking my life, so I could lose everything that mattered. Might as well let the mountain shake me free.

A memory came from years ago, shortly after we'd met, barely a year out of high school: riding my motorcycle on a Wisconsin country road. She sat behind me, and it began to rain, big warm summertime drops soaking us quickly, the steady hiss of the tire spray steaming on the engine's hot pipes. I felt her hands clutching my chest, her body pressing firmly into my back, through the wet cloth of my shirt. I looked back once and she smiled under the helmet; and that was when I knew I'd always love her.

But now I saw that memory from outside myself, and the scene shrank away and began to spin, the two of us on that bike growing smaller on the wet country road, shrinking to a speck on a gray line in a sea of green. And, still spinning, my perspective rose higher; the whole earth fled away from me until it was just a ball, shining blue and brown, like pictures I'd seen taken from orbit. Then it too became a speck, and vanished, leaving only the wheel of stars in a great dark void.

My hands were slipping from the rock, when something snorted loudly right behind me. Startled, I jumped; opened my eyes and saw the rock on the other side of the crack coming at me.

I thought I'd make it, my foot found a toehold and one hand was securing a good grip, as I leaned forward into the rock. Then the barrel of my rifle, still lashed to the side of my pack and sticking overhead, slammed into the rock and broke my grip. For a wild second I hung on one toehold, arms churning to keep from overbalancing backward. Just as I felt my foot starting to slip, my right hand found a fissure, then my left another hold.

I hugged the rock, panting, and looked over my shoulder. A goat had come up right behind me and now stood just a few feet away, regarding me with those black marble eyes, his gleaming black horns sweeping up in a wide fork. His ears rotated forward, and his eyes looked almost sad.

"So, did you lose something too?" Now I was talking to a goat, and I realized there were tears running down my face.

I don't know whether the goat understood my question, felt my pain, or had somehow shared my memory. But suddenly an image formed in my mind: of rushing through the stars, like running into a multitude of gleaming raindrops. The image changed and I saw a world, shining in colors against the darkness. The world grew—then something was wrong. The image was spinning, as if in reverse of my own imagined memory, only instead of that Wisconsin road, it was these snow-covered mountains coming closer. . . .

A time of waiting, attempting self-repairs. I had the impression they were something formless then. Then the moment of realization: all that was known was lost.

The image changed again, and I had the sense of walking, admiring the strangeness of my feet . . . shiny black hooves, below the long white

hair. Clumping metallicly across the deck and out into the cold gas that burned inside the first breath, then clicking softer across the rocks. Learning to feed on the tundra, grasses, and lichens, to avoid or kill the predators, the four-legged and the two. Living in this icy, vertical world, and always, always looking up at the sky, to the stars. Waiting. . .

Waiting for what? I thought. The goat cocked his head, but the images came confused, as if he didn't know or had forgotten.

"What are you waiting for?" Maybe Davis had caught spillover of the images, but his shout broke the mind connection, or spell—whatever it was. The goat and I both moved, I trying to find a safer position, the goat walking up the smooth rock like a spider until he disappeared somewhere above. I started again toward Davis.

"Don't shoot, Rick!" I called. "I'm coming to help."

"You're an idiot, Carlson," he yelled, hoarsely, as I drew near. "So eager to finish me, you just passed up a point-blank shot at *the* world record billy!" He was lying weakly with his back against the cliff face as I finally clambered onto the ledge, watching me but at least not pointing the gun.

"Pretty neat way to bump a guy, stampeding those goats over me last night. I got bruises from their damn hooves."

"I didn't do it." I shed the pack carefully on the ledge. "Those aren't normal goats."

"That's for sure. Every one's a God-damn trophy. And you passed up the biggest." He watched without movement as I jacked the bolt of his rifle; but there were no cartridges left.

"I've got to try to set that leg," I said. "Maybe I can use your rifle for a splint."

"I shouldn't have wasted my last shot at those goats," he said. "Why didn't you shoot back? I know I'm a goner. If I can't take you along, then the only thing I've got left is to hope they find one of your bullets in me."

"Shut up, and have some water," I said.

He closed his eyes. "If you're not going to shoot that billy, let me. You can claim the one I shot yesterday."

I figured he was half-crazy from the pain and cold, or else just talking to keep up his nerve, and let him go on. I gave him some aspirin with the water. I had never set a bone, but could feel the broken edge low on his right femur, just under the skin. He cried out and cursed me, but eventually I realized I couldn't do it without hurting him. Too bad.

His face went white as I felt the bone grating together, and sweat beaded on his forehead, but he never passed out or stopped cursing me. When I thought I had his leg lined up as straight as I could get it, I lashed the rifle alongside with some cord from my pack.

Now all I had to do was get him off that ledge. I thought about staying put and trying to signal a plane; except we hadn't seen one since leaving

the coast. Or maybe I should make him as comfortable as possible, and walk out for help; except he'd be dead by the time we could get here with a helicopter, if the weather even allowed for flying.

I kept telling myself I didn't care whether the son of a bitch died, I just didn't want to have to explain it, especially to Cindy.

Sixty or seventy feet down, the rock leveled a bit, in a short stretch of loose boulders and scree that angled toward the easier route we had climbed. I told Davis that if he could help with his hands, I was going to try to lower him there with the climbing ribbon. I tied it under his arms, then wound the ribbon around a point of solid rock that jutted out of the ledge.

"You're going to drop it, aren't you, Carlson? Make it look like you tried to rescue me, huh?" But he was game, and helped me lower him over the edge. The ribbon burned my hands as I let it slide a foot at a time, the rock frayed the ribbon, and if the loop crept any higher it would slip free of the rock and we'd both go down. But finally the weight was gone, and I looked to see Davis parked securely below. I tied the line off on the rock, wished myself luck, and climbed down slowly and carefully.

"Okay, so now what?" he whispered weakly. He must have realized then that I wasn't going to kill him; his body relaxed and his eyes closed.

"Good question," I said, mostly to myself. "Only four thousand vertical feet to go."

And it was starting to snow.

The descent blurs together as a series of painful, tedious moments. The last thing I remember clearly before we reached the base of the mountain on the second day was turning for one last look at the goats, but seeing an impenetrable wall of falling snow, winter's first assault on their mountain. I imagined how they might still see us, two dark forms in that sea of white.

I once read that adaptability is a trait of intelligence, and that humans are the most adaptable creature on earth. I knew that last part wasn't true. They had come long ago, so adaptable they had become the one creature fit to survive in that vertical world where they had crashed. And they spent the centuries or millennia surviving, eating, reproducing, just like real mountain goats, and all the time waiting. For reinforcements? Rescue?

But it was their adaptability that fascinated me, the will, the struggle to survive, one day at a time. Somehow, we did the same. At first I lashed our two pack frames together into a kind of sled for Davis and, with it tied by the ribbon to my waist, we slipped and fell downward, huddling together under my bag at night, eating and drinking a few crumbs and drops when we had the chance. The snowfall eventually turned to cold rain as we lost altitude.

Davis stayed unconscious most of the time. His leg looked pretty bad,

even though I loosened the bindings to help circulation whenever I could. I never did get to tell him I'd left his cape and horns lying on top of the mountain. To be covered by the snow, that would also cover, maybe for another century, that metal craft in the ravine.

When we reached the flat stream bottom, I cut two young birch, stripped them into poles, and made a travois to haul Davis. Somehow we made it to the boat the following evening, and the motor started on the second pull—miraculously, since outboards had always given me trouble in the past.

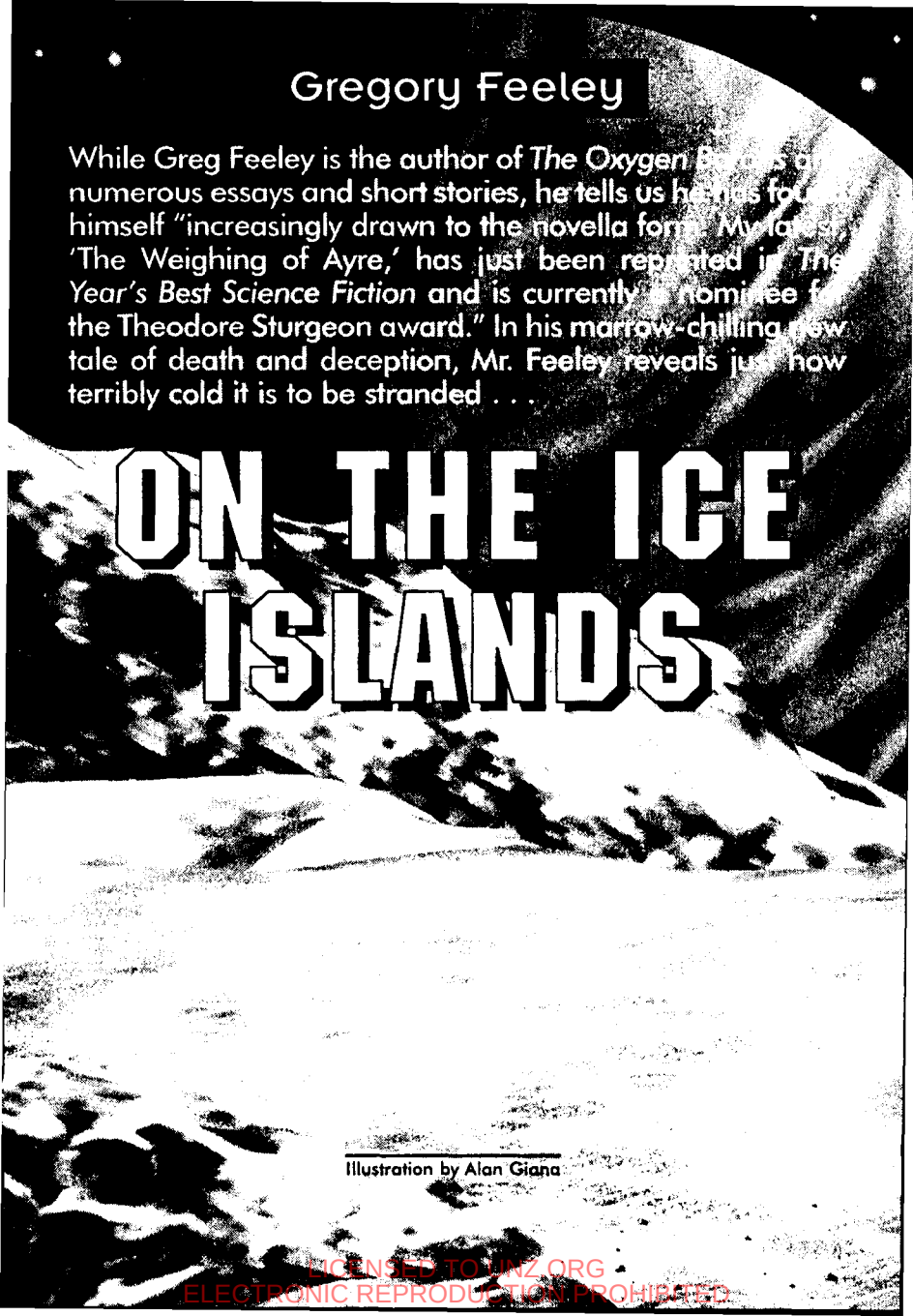
The doctor in Homer took one look and ordered Davis flown to an Anchorage hospital. He said Davis would live, but looked pretty grim when he mentioned the leg. Somewhere in between that and giving a report to the police, I called Cindy.

I had to drive Davis's car and trailer home, my body one-half step from complete exhaustion, but mind working clearly as I rehearsed. Still one thing, the worst thing left to do—what I had been hiding from ever since the phone message. When I reached town, I parked his rig in his driveway and left the keys under the door mat. His wife and kids were gone, probably to see him at the hospital. I started my own car and went home.

She was still crying, up in our bedroom, five hours after my call. She looked up and tried to smile. On the way home I'd figured out that she wouldn't give him up, even if he did lose the leg, because sympathy would just be thrown in on top of everything else she felt for him. I probably would have to talk to Miller about a piece of the business, just to keep up the house payments. She'd go live with him, but maybe they'd outgrow each other after a time. Maybe she'd want to come back. I'd probably want her. But maybe I wouldn't by then. Or maybe, if I was growing a brain tumor, I'd be dead. One day at a time. Maybe I could learn to live in a world turned on its side.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Thanks a lot for asking," I said, standing firm in case the floor became the wall. ●

We appreciate comments about the magazine, and would like to hear from more of our readers. Editorial correspondence should include the writer's name and mailing address, even if you use e-mail. Letters can be e-mailed to 71154.662@compuserve.com or posted to Letters to the Editor, Asimov's, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Letters may be shortened and edited for publication. The e-mail address is for editorial correspondence *only*—questions about subscriptions should be directed to Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625.



Gregory Feeley

While Greg Feeley is the author of *The Oxygen Bar* and numerous essays and short stories, he tells us he has found himself "increasingly drawn to the novella form." My latest, 'The Weighing of Ayre,' has just been reprinted in *The Year's Best Science Fiction* and is currently a nominee for the Theodore Sturgeon award." In his marrow-chilling new tale of death and deception, Mr. Feeley reveals just how terribly cold it is to be stranded . . .

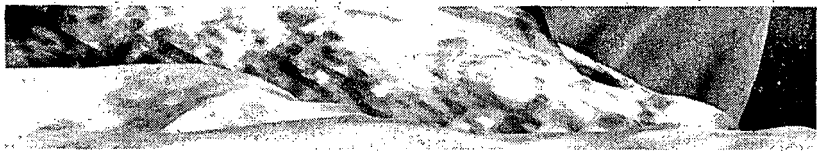
ON THE ICE ISLANDS

Illustration by Alan Giana

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



None of them knew the color of the sky. The terrible dispossessed children, living in a universe of corridors and chambers, regarded the screens of wheeling stars with the uncomprehending indifference they might have accorded a history program from Earth; while their quarry, hunted through tangles of conduit and wallboarded spaces they could not clearly remember, dreamed of empyrean blue and open air that they would never see again. The youthful elect, escaped from the decaying carcass of the *Centaur* in their gleaming ceramic vessels, looked down upon Neptune's turbid troposphere and imagined its methane clouds seen from beneath, an imagined zone where their floating habitats could bob free of the killer winds yet see them swirling above: the miracle of weather, illuminated by faint sunlight like the smoke-dimmed windows of cathedral stained glass.

Yarrow woke in a panic, thrashing in sweat-slicked sheets that twined about her. Her skins began to breathe more easily as soon as she kicked them free, but her heart continued to pound in the darkness, which she finally banished with a word. Sitting up in the reassuring half-light, Yarrow listened to the fading sounds of struggle, which seemed to recede beyond the new wallboard partitions. A sharp pain stabbed behind her left eye, unmistakable evidence that her vision was not simply a dream.

Sleep was no longer a possibility, and Yarrow pulled her orange jumper from the wall. Regulations decreed that workers wear their clen-suit skins at all times and be able to shuck off any additional garments in five seconds, which left little room for fashion. Unwilling to display her indifferent physique among colleagues, Yarrow wore a pocketed single-suit like a preoccupied lab worker.

The empty crawlspace—wide enough for two people to squeeze past each other—was illuminated every two meters with pairs of facing glow-strips that banished shadows. Yarrow still enjoyed the luxury of ample lighting, enough that the cramped quarters rarely bothered her.

The commode was the size of a closet, which is why workers were encouraged to use the sloptubes in their rooms. Up before her shift, Yarrow was able to get in after only a minute's wait, a bargain. Glancing at the brightly lit mirror, she considered getting out her comb, then decided to let the next user in. She opened the hatch and floated out, nodding at Ling who (she suspected) would rather die than slip the funnel of the sloptube into her skins.

Yarrow lingered over breakfast, her last meal in a space large enough

to seat a crowded six. She sat with the window on her left, her fellow diners overhead and to the right. The empty seat beside her seemed, at that moment, more attractive than axial orientation with her companions, who were deep in uninteresting conversation.

"But only below four hundred bars," said Chin, one of the engineers. "Get above that and conductivity changes entirely."

"A sufficiently powerful signal will penetrate both levels," said Zhou calmly. He stirred the bottom of his bowl and raised a mouthful carefully to his lips. Eating rice with chopsticks was permissible in the *Lotus* if you let no grains escape.

"Not with that turbulence," replied Chin.

"The proper wavelength—"

Yarrow had no interest in conditions at the planet's core, a sullen coal that fed the currents and winds of the world's layered atmosphere but possessed no true energies. She had not spent her life sailing to Neptune in order to study dead magma.

"Any word from the Ship?" asked Chang. There were half a dozen vessels now deployed through greater Neptune, but the *Centaur* would never lose its singularity for those who had come out on it.

Tsujimoto scowled. "They just announced that their transmitters would be down for the next two hours. Don't bother running to check the morning feed."

Chin pulled a long face, but the others appeared unconcerned. Yarrow, who had no interest in communicating with the *Centaur*, did not even trouble to react. Hot tea rose in her bulb, which she lifted from the table with a click.

"Up and out, Yarrow?" asked Zhou companionably.

"Ho," she allowed, without enthusiasm. "In twenty-five minutes."

Her messmates exchanged smiles. Romantic liaisons during the four-day tour at the Teardrop were a favorite theme, but no one could imagine one here.

"Is Castor up yet?" Chin asked abruptly. Both Zhou and Tsujimoto glanced at their wristbands to calculate whether the pod had swung out from behind Neptune, and so would be available for direct communication. Taking her bulb with her, Yarrow kicked out of the room and down the *Lotus's* long axis, through the narrow tube that separated the life-support module from the docking bay, and into the lock where the duster waited.

George was running a needless systems check when Yarrow poked her head through the seal. He was already in his clensuit, had probably got in and suited up early in order to avoid having to engage in the delicate business of hooking up with Yarrow present. His clensuit, still partway open, revealed his favorite skins, mottled yellow on black in a pattern that he once explained was copied from the terrestrial gila monster. Yarrow had never asked what that meant.

"Everything all right?" she asked blandly.

Since sarcasm was not evident in her tone, he detected none. "Looks good," he answered, glancing up at her. Still halfway through the seal, Yarrow unsnapped her kit and stuck it to her seat, then began to wriggle out of her jumper. If peeling off a garment to reveal undecorated skins possessed erotic connotations for George, he at least wouldn't see most of it.

In fact George kept his eyes firmly on the systems displays as Yarrow pushed her way into the cramped cabin, lifted the clensuit that lay in her seat like a desiccated spaceman, and pulled it on, unself-consciously threading its plumbing through her skins. The clock showed six minutes to shutoff, plenty of time by prevailing standards but perhaps not by those of George's day.

"Ready?" she asked him, a bit maliciously.

At this he glanced sideways at her, and Yarrow noticed the dark bags under his eyes, which always seemed especially lurid when he was under stress. When she'd first met him she had vaguely imagined that the bags were the product of piloting in Earthspace—accelerational stress, living on planets—but later someone told her that the bruised capillaries Chills sported were hibernation damage. Yarrow didn't understand how the fine structures of the brain and liver could survive eighteen years of cold storage if such grosser injuries had been sustained subcutaneously, but she had never bothered to ask. She remembered from her days as a lab assistant on the *Centaur* the frozen samples tended to spoil once thawed, and that, as far as she was concerned, was what had happened to George.

"I'm composing myself," he replied mildly, returning his gaze forward and closing his eyes.

Earthspacers also tended to meditate before piloting missions, even those that were wholly automated. This meditation may have been justified, although Yarrow had her doubts: a sterile transit between points in a vacuum required scant spiritual reserves. But George had traveled from Earthspace through vacuum and lost his soul in the process, so perhaps he was right to accord the act respect.

Yarrow spent the remaining minutes looking about the cabin, which would be her home for four days. Most of the walls were devoted to screen, which George would convert to Views in order to create the illusion (compelling for him alone) of spaciousness; but there were fittings protruding at odd locations, and Yarrow proceeded to familiarize herself with them. The screen before her might show a bank of displays or sunrise on Mercury, but Yarrow's toothbrush holder would always be at her right hand.

"Two minutes," the Onboard announced. Yarrow dutifully closed her eyes and sought to prepare herself. If this was not a journey across water or through air, both elements lay at the end of it, at least in frozen potential. She concentrated on the ball of stilled volatiles, but the image that rose before her resounded with cries, elongated shadows waving down

half-lit corridors flecked with blood. Yarrow shook her head, then turned to ask George if he had caught the evening feed. George was counting down the remaining seconds with eyes closed, however, so she turned back with a sigh and waited for the kick.

Pushoff was nothing dramatic, and Yarrow felt only a few seconds' force as the extensor arm shoved the duster smoothly from the bay. George, who liked realtime models, had converted the screen before him, and now watched the starscape list slowly as the duster yawed. The rear-view screen showed the *Lotus* retreating gracefully, its panels opened like petals to catch what the *Centaur* might send it. The image drifted to one side as the duster rotated into proper alignment.

"Spray-on in eighteen seconds," the Onboard observed. George hated the duster engine, and longed for the day when the expedition had stocked enough hydrogen and oxygen to be able to blow it out thrusters and lose it forever. Yarrow, who had grown up in the rigidly closed world of the *Centaur*, possessed no such qualms. Accelerating minute particles of local matter to relativistic speeds pleased her costive sensibility, for even the *Centaur* could spare tonnes of pulverized rock. And the dust of greater Neptune—blackening the rings, coating the inner moons like carbonized exhaust—was everywhere: it filled the region inside the Roche limit in bands that spiraled down to the surface; it clumped in ring structures; it settled like soot over everything, even brilliant Triton, which sprayed nitrogen geysers to coat it with fresh snow. Dust particles fired by the engine were expelled at speeds that sent them out of Neptune orbit forever, and Yarrow—who lived in close spaces, and was neat—liked that fine.

Lights flickered across the displays, reporting the build-up of energies in the acceleration coils, the ionization rates of the reaction mass. Yarrow didn't know why George wanted to see the figures: if something went wrong it would be corrected, or the mission scrubbed, without his intercession. She found herself feeling for the faint vibrations the swelling charge imposed on the cabin's frame, but her clensuit muffled such faint harmonics, and it was only with "Spray on" and the growing push of the engines that she felt a roar of static, grit lofted to the velocity of flare particles. George might find engine burns routine, but Yarrow did not: Reversal had been the greatest event of her life, and every acceleration brought it astonishingly back.

Six point seven seconds of thrust—she had read the mission profile as a matter of routine—and the roar abruptly ceased, without echo or diminishing grumble. The thrill of being pressed into their couch was gone, the deceptive freedom of zero G restored. As if waking from a brief but vivid dream, Yarrow looked across wonderingly to George, who, matter of fact, had converted all the screenspace to View and had made the cabin a cupola looking upon the vastness of greater Neptune.

"Transit time?" he asked.

"Seven hours, sixteen minutes," the Onboard replied. Yarrow could already make out the Teardrop against the field of stars, half again their size and faintly (or so she imagined) irregular. Were the comet closer to the Sun, its reflected light would shine brilliantly.

"Message from the *Lotus*," the Onboard announced. "Nora Tsujimoto."

Her voice came through tight with anxiety. "We've just got a short message from Castor; something about an abortive mutiny on the *Centaur*."

"Mutiny?" George repeated, voice disbelieving.

"They said 'uprising.' No one knows anything more."

Yarrow found herself speaking before she had registered any emotion. "Why did they say abortive?"

George shot her a look. "That's the word they used," Tsujimoto said fretfully. "Then they signed off. I should sign off. Call me if you hear anything." She disappeared with a click.

Yarrow and George stared at each other.

"An *uprising*. What could that be?" he asked. Yarrow knew that George, like her, had already run past this point, imagining the bloody mutiny those stories used to predict and wondering what faction had sought to seize power, how the Civil Police had responded, what was happening at Castor and Pollux. It seemed somehow indecent not to pause at the brink of this calamity, to acknowledge that one had swiftly imagined the horrors beyond.

"Does the CP have guns?" she asked. It was long supposed that the cops controlled an unseen cache of weapons.

"What about the Ship's Officers? They were military."

"Not military as in carrying sidearms. They just wore uniforms."

"I bet some had sidearms."

They were avoiding the central terror, skirting a frightening vacancy whose edges crumbled larger. Yarrow began to speak, then saw that George's eyes had taken on a distant cast, as though something puzzling had occurred to him. She touched the bead in her ear, but no voice came through. Yarrow began to ask the Onboard whether a transmission was reaching the duster when George raised his hand and tapped out a code on a square that had darkened in front of him. Her head, turning to follow his action, abruptly encountered an impedance, as though some object were resting next to her helmet. Trying to draw back, she found herself again balked. Her helmet was held fast, as in a vise.

Yarrow tried to raise her arm and found it would not move. Her clen-suit had frozen in place like rusting armor.

"George!" she called. "I am experiencing suit malfunction."

Silence. No alarms flashed; the starscape remained quiet. George's arm had retreated from her field of vision, and she could not see the rest of him.

"Onboard: Emergency," she said in a clear voice. "Display life support."

"The Onboard won't reply," said George suddenly. "You have been denied access."

"George, what the hell's going on?"

"I have received a message from the Ship reporting that you are a security risk. Until the situation on the *Centaur* has stabilized, you are considered a danger to this mission, and must be neutralized if it is to continue. On orders from the Bridge, I have sent a command to the Onboard inactivating your clensuit's user controls."

"What?" Astonishment swamped any further response, even indignation. Yarrow tried to round on him, found herself unable to move, and began to struggle violently. The clensuit, still secured in its crash web, rocked slightly. She stopped abruptly, took a slow breath. Adrenaline was flooding her system: she made herself relax.

"George, that's crazy. If I had a criminal record, I would never have made it onto the *Lotus*. Who gave you this order? George?"

Silence in her helmet. Yarrow listened for the sound of George breathing, but heard nothing.

"Onboard: Emergency," she said. "Display suit functions."

No reply, not even the response of Access Denied. Coldly, Yarrow began to test her suit's remaining functions. Breathing air was available; the toilet systems worked. The flush of heat that had followed her initial alarm was being dispelled, and her wet underarms were drying. Yarrow guessed that the food tube near her chin would produce emergency stores on demand. But the Onboard would not respond to any summons, and attempts to place an outgoing call, or even to monitor the news feed, brought no response. Yarrow wondered if the Onboard had been instructed to disregard her orders, or she had been actually cut off from it.

The angle of her helmet, half turned toward George, was growing uncomfortable. "George," she said sharply, "I have to straighten my neck. See for yourself."

No response. It occurred to her that George might want to avoid defending his actions, yet wish quietly to listen to whatever she might say. In which case he could not adjust her helmet without betraying himself.

Yarrow arched her neck within its rigid confines, seeking the most comfortable position. Settling herself as best she could, she closed her eyes; then opened them a second later. The image came to her of George, sensing her slowed respiration through the Onboard, leaning over her helmet, looking in upon her sleeping face. She sought to opaque the faceplate, but the system remained unresponsive.

Yarrow looked at the screens before her. They each displayed contiguous views of the starfield, like large leaded windows looking upon space. The craft, Yarrow guessed, had emerged from Neptune's umbra: an almost imperceptible quality of the blackness suggested that the scattered dust of Greater Neptune was catching the Sun's dim light.

Seven hours to the Teardrop, during which Yarrow now had more to think about than she had expected. Unable to turn away from the gritty sky, she closed her eyes. She, at least, knew its color: one step up from black.

She woke to the faint vibrations of the engine charging up, a hum she took several seconds to recognize. Evidently the immobilized clensuit conducted sound better, faint compensation for her disabled radio.

Her helmet was facing forward, having evidently been adjusted while she slept. Yarrow could imagine George waiting until she was deeply asleep before carrying out the furtive act: violation posing as solicitude.

The Dragon's Teardrop hung before her: a dim chip, tear-shaped only when seen from a different angle, bereft of detail in the natural light. An enhanced view, such as it would appear by the sunlight of Earthspace, would show a dust-burnished iceberg, darker on its leading edge as it swung, tidally locked, through High Neptune Orbit. George liked enhanced views; the dimness of Greater Neptune distressed him, perhaps because he had not lived through the *Centaur's* long retreat from Sol.

Yaw engines hissed briefly and the Teardrop began to drift toward starboard. Yarrow watched the stars slide by, then felt a compensating series of hisses as the image steadied. No warning was spoken as the dust engine fired, slowing the craft's backward approach. George evidently knew that she was awake, whether he acknowledged monitoring her or not.

"You can't complete the mission alone," she remarked. "You haven't trained as long as I have. And your hand-eye coordination has never really come back."

No reply. Yarrow listened attentively as the engines sprayed and the ship slowed, then felt the resonant clang of the duster connecting with the docking collar. Anchored deep in the Teardrop's ice, the collar was their landing pad and their base, the single installation on a chunk of ice measuring a quarter of a cubic kilometer. Held fast like Yarrow herself, the ship was at rest.

George seemed resolved to treat her like a statue, a prisoner in a clensuit-sized cell. She could feel him moving about, trying not to cross into her line of vision. Once he brushed against her arm, and drew quickly away.

Yarrow waited for the faint shudder of the airlock cycling. It took longer than it should—was George calling for instructions?—but came at last, clangorous through the rigid suit. George would now be negotiating his way along handholds to the comet's surface, and Yarrow was alone in the craft.

"I know you're listening," she said. "George doesn't suspect your existence, but I know."

There was no reply. Yarrow settled herself more comfortably, relaxed now that she knew no eyes gazed upon her, and spoke thoughtfully.

"You had him enter that order to make him feel complicit, didn't you? Or no—to make him feel *empowered*. It wouldn't do for him to realize that the ship can be controlled remotely."

The unanswering silence did not trouble her. "Did you arrange to place a Chill on the mission? I imagine they must be good risks: loyal to mission objectives, unembittered by the past decade's disappointment, politically ignorant. They must be well dispersed about Greater Neptune by now.

"I don't suppose you could free my hands for a minute, so I could straighten the kink in my right wrist? Didn't think so. I wouldn't do to prove yourself to me, in case I actually do retain doubts. And anyway, you might not have such fine control over my suit; likelier it's all or nothing."

She sucked on her food tube, which yielded up a flavored paste called *apricot*. "This stuff is awful. There were two pirogi in the hamper, and I bet George ate both of them. The rewards of political compliance."

The stars before her drifted at a steady but non-periodic pace. Perturbed by repeated pushoffs, the comet now tumbled erratically, precessing like a wobbling top. Eventually, she knew, Neptune would swing into view, as well as the Sun, the *Centaur* (you had to look for it), and waxing Triton. George always looked pained when he saw the Sun, as though it had left *him*. "You're looking in the wrong direction," she told him once.

"There it is," she said. A blue limb, darker than a hue should be and yet carry such richness; glided slowly along the screen's right edge, disappearing halfway down. Yarrow began counting seconds, and reached 1187 before Neptune reappeared, a slightly broader slice than before. Her helmet monitor gave the same elapsed period, but she still didn't trust it.

Why make so much of fragmentary blue? The line was from a poem she had had to learn, taught by an old fool who would recite favored bits at his sullen students. The poem's meaning (it had at least been short) had something to do with the blue of the heavens being more real than the various blues of Earthly things, and so what? After a minute the matching line came to her: *When heaven presents in sheets the solid hue*. The teacher admitted that this had been slightly old-fashioned language even when the poem was written, which left the poet no excuse, Yarrow thought. Li Ch'ing-chao wrote in a style still lucid as water, in a language whose people didn't wear out locutions with each generation.

Neptune was no solid hue; its deep blue stirred with white like sour cream into soup. Yarrow could observe it for hours, watching its whipped curds change shape as they crept across its face, imagining the forces that drove them. If her teacher had meant for them to think of Neptune, she had either missed it or forgotten. She was still musing on this when the voice addressed her.

"Relax your muscles," it said in the Onboard's uninflected tone. "The suit is about to move."

Startled, Yarrow tensed, then ordered her body to relax. A second later her right hand swung up and carefully made a fist. The crash web released itself, and her legs drew up and kicked lightly against the couch. Yarrow drifted across the cabin and bumped against the screens.

"Hey! Give me control back. This suit isn't a remote control device."

Silence. Yarrow's arms and legs were moving tentatively, like those of a recovered invalid exploring his range of motion. Yarrow pulled hard on her left forearm, and managed to impede slightly its slow wave.

"Am I being exercised? I appreciate the thought. How about speaking up again, since you have already come out?"

The clensuit extended its arms, working the fingers one by one. Suddenly Yarrow understood.

"You need something done, is that it? And you don't trust me, so you want to use my suit like a bodyglove? I don't think you have the dexterity."

It came to her instantly, with a pang like a jab in the stomach. No sooner did she wonder what in the cabin her oppressor might want her to do than she knew: nothing. Any device in the duster's interior could be controlled electronically. Yarrow was being readied for a trip outside.

"Forget it," she cried, alarmed. "You're not walking this suit out there. Tell me what you want, and I'll do it. But trying to manhandle this thing on the ice will get me killed."

No response, but the clensuit paused in its exertions. Perhaps someone was thinking it over.

Thinking quickly, Yarrow said, "My scope for sabotage would be limited anyway, would it not? And you could kill me if I didn't cooperate. Even if you couldn't open my helmet, you could simply lock up the ship. That might be worth it to me, assuming I am a saboteur, if I could wreck something major, but how could I? Think about it."

She continued to think herself, reasoning outracing words. "Hold it—George doesn't need help, does he? He's *in trouble*—otherwise you could assist him by driving the tools out there. You could probably even do so without his realizing it."

And at this the entity spoke. "You can divest yourself of the suit."

Yarrow was so startled that she merely gaped. Then she understood. "You mean let the suit waltz outside and leave me here naked? No chance. It hasn't the strength to do real work—don't you know that?—and you'd fail at whatever you want. And then where would I be? You think I'd fly back like that, returning alone and without my clensuit?"

The pause that followed lasted so long that Yarrow wondered if her controller had given up whatever its plan was. Then the clensuit jerked once, as limbs do in sleep, and she realized that control of it was hers

again. Immediately she whirled about, confirming—though the size of the cabin left little doubt—that she was alone.

"Hello?" No voice replied from either her helmet speaker or the cabin system. Yarrow put a call through to George. "Chow, you treacherous shitbag, are you okay? It would serve you well if you weren't."

No reply. Yarrow checked his suit diagnostic, which should send back a signal of either Okay or Emergency, but got no response at all.

She glanced at the com system, which could send a message to the *Lotus*, or even the *Centaur*; then shrugged. Nothing to tell either party, and she suspected that an idle status query to the *Centaur* would provoke the intercession of the Voice, who was (she was sure) still monitoring her.

"I'm going out," she said. "If you know something that would help me, now's the time."

She ran an integrity check on her suit, glanced at the screen, then moved toward the airlock. Abruptly her helmet seal popped open, causing her to jump convulsively.

Yarrow looked down at the flaring seal. Had this happened in vacuum, her helmet would have blown off.

"I get it," she said. She resealed her helmet and palmed open the airlock.

The airlock was no bigger than a coffin, a pair of doors that closed upon the cabin and opened onto space. Looking down, Yarrow saw a field of dim ice, Neptune-blue in its reflected light.

"Base lights on," she said. A dozen white eyes winked open below her, ringed by smudges of surrounding ice that glowed like fluorescing minerals. The duster rested on a platform two meters above the rugged surface, which was darkened in turn by unlit boxes and modules pitoned to its surface. The utter vacuum gave the illuminated planes and shadows a crystalline clarity.

Thinking that the ship's antenna might be damaged, Yarrow hailed George through her suit transmitter. No answer. She began to clamber down the rungs stitching the hull, mindful that an incautious leap could send her sailing free of the Teardrop's negligible gravity.

"Care to share what you know?" she asked the surrounding landscape. "Such as what has befallen George, or where he was when it happened? I can't believe you don't know that."

She might have been alone on this world, the only living creature within ten thousand kilometers. Quite possibly she was.

Activating her helmet light, Yarrow slowly turned through 360 degrees. A dozen steps away from the craft, she already stood on a slightly different plane from it. The horizon was closer in some directions than in others, and sloped away after a few dozen meters. Standing on the Teardrop was like (someone had told her) looking out from the top of an

icy peak at Earth's nighttime sky. Aside from suggesting that some mountaintops were the size of comets, this didn't tell her much.

Crates; roped perimeters of pitons for future projects; platforms of reinforced wallboard like the floors of unbuilt houses. Yarrow had to aim her beam low, else it shone straight into the sky, returning nothing. No footprints on the hard rippled ice, no scrap of fabric clinging to a corner. He could be just outside her sight lines, or on the comet's far side.

Yarrow was studying the middle distance when her visor went black. She exclaimed in alarm, and had begun to raise her hands to her face when control was wrested from her. The clensuit turned smartly and strode forward, surefooted in Yarrow's blindness. Several panicked seconds passed before she realized what was happening; then she howled her outrage.

"*Stop this!* You can't use someone this way! I—" She hurled her strength against the suit, straining against its resistance as if pulling herself up a wall. The clensuit, which was working its hands rapidly, abruptly began to go cold at the extremities, underarms, and groin. Yarrow gasped, unreasoning terror flooding her. The chill, like liquid nitrogen spilling through the suit seams, was spreading rapidly.

She went limp, fighting a powerful urge to try to wrap her arms around herself. The spread of cold ceased, but the cold remained, dissipating through her limbs and torso. Yarrow began shivering, and felt with astonishment her teeth begin to chatter.

Minutes later—the passage of time lost in the black welling of terror—her visor abruptly cleared. She was standing back where she had been, facing the rippled horizon. Yarrow began to sag, then caught herself. She pushed up her suit temperature (though it was by now warm enough), and turned to look behind her. There was no indication of what it was the suit had done.

"I'll remember this," she whispered. Too softly for the mike to pick up; but that was just exhaustion.

The glideline began near her right arm, a slim pyloned ribbon like a handrail that ran across the ice field and vanished over the horizon. Yarrow took one of the grips dangling from it and clipped it to her suit. She braced a foot against the kickplate and launched herself, skittering out along the line like an upside-down gondola.

The grip squealed merrily, a startling effect in silent vacuum. Yarrow swept her beam about the horizon, seeing nothing that might be a clensuited figure. Something was niggling at her hindbrain, but she didn't have time to coax it forth.

George had courted danger in venturing out alone, and now Yarrow was doing the same. Most of their duties could be accomplished by a pair of advanced mechs, but the intelligent ones that could match the manipulative capacity of two people were in constant demand on the Triton pro-

ject, and semi-skilled labor was cheap. What modest dangers attended the mission jeopardized only the workers themselves.

The glideline circled the comet like a meridian, allowing workers to circumnavigate its long axis without having to use ice boots or their jetpacks. The whine of the grip oscillated as Yarrow bounced lightly against its elasticity, her path tracing a sine wave above the ribbon's precise curve.

Abruptly—the thought convulsed her muscles before fully taking form—Yarrow grabbed hard on the brake. The grip shrieked, slewing her forward as it slowed. She struck the rail with her opposite forearm, releasing the grip, and rebounded against its tethered length. Feeling the rail rasp against her ribs, she grabbed at it with both hands, a tailless monkey clutching the last strung vine.

Breathing hard, Yarrow looked down the rail stretching before her, which disappeared unbroken over the near horizon. The image was coming clear only now in her mind: the glideline, snapped by meteoric debris, seismic shifting, or perhaps just cold stress, raising two jagged ends pointing just past each other. A glider, oblivious in the darkness, flies off it like a load fired from a mass driver, sailing on a tangent into a Neptune orbit of its own.

Very slowly, Yarrow let go of the rail and, after floating free for several seconds, began to pull herself, hand over hand, along its length. She narrowed the focus of her beam and ran it carefully along the rail for a dozen meters ahead of her. In the absence of visual landmarks, the receding ribbon swelled in scale: a tram line soaring over a polar plain.

No breaks were apparent, but Yarrow found herself unable to glance to either side for more than a few seconds before she felt compelled to look back at the glideline. How fast could a worker escape the Teardrop and still be able to return via his jetpack? Was George perhaps returning now? (She scanned the sky.) Had the Teardrop's spin placed him over its opposite hemisphere, from which he might return to the duster unseen by her? (But then would not the Voice recall her?)

Something was wrong with her reasoning; but she didn't dare pause to find it. Enjoining herself to think clearly, she called up the duty sheet on her screen and wondered which tasks George would have turned to first. Presumably those that a single person could accomplish; the rest would be best deferred.

In the event, George seemed to have begun with the tasks closest to hand, pausing at each stop like a milkman. A water processor whose microwave dish had darkened with dust had been cleaned; and a large cutting device, its talons gripping square meters of ice that had begun to fracture under the strain, had been (crudely) repositioned. "Going to let me discover everything on my own?" she asked, expecting and getting no answer.

Something was wrong at the third site. A scaffold post, emerging slowly over the horizon, leaned at a vertiginous angle; and Yarrow soon saw a

jig, slight but unmistakable, in the glideline's path. Her heart in her mouth, she approached it cautiously; but the ribbon proved unbroken. The worksite beyond was now visible, however, and she saw what had happened at once.

A deep trench had been opened in the ice, a smooth-walled crevasse, several meters deep, that had permitted core samples to be taken from several degrees of arc. Once a meter wide, the trench had crunched shut like a frost giant's crooked mouth. Splintered icecakes piled up at the ragged seam, and the ground seemed lower to one side.

Yarrow shifted her grip to the tributary gliderail and approached the site cautiously. The ribbon ran beside the trench site—a guardrail overlooking the verge of a vanished canyon—permitting her to shine her beam along the impacted edge. Two thirds of the way down she saw it: a glimpse of clensuit among the glittering shards.

"Jesus Christ," she said. Christians had the best maledictions.

Grasping spurs of ice, Yarrow pulled herself closer. Wedging one boot in a crevasse, she began to prise away blocks of rubble. Quickly she discovered that the clensuit lay half a meter below ground level, glinting between two floes propped against each other. It took her nearly an hour to clear the intervening space: although gravity was negligible, loose chunks of ice kept spilling into her excavation from isostatic pressure.

The scrap was George's shoulder, which meant that his helmet lay beneath a large block that was pinned by surrounding rubble. Yarrow hooked her fingers under the block, which proved too massive to dislodge. She thought she could feel a helmet collar.

She fumbled through her belt kit, which contained a small cutting laser. Even at sharpest focus, the device was barely sufficient for spot welding; but how much power did it require to vaporize ice?

Quite a bit, she soon discovered: the beam produced a small puff of steam but made remarkably little headway. Belatedly Yarrow remembered that that the ice on the Teardrop was only 50°K, and could absorb much heat before melting. In the end she sharpened its focus to a pinpoint and sought to slice through the floe. When this failed to work—the escaping steam, she suspected, was refreezing in the space she had already cut—she took out her pick and hacked angrily. The nanometer-scale tip pierced the ice readily, and after some effort Yarrow broke the block in two and wedged the halves centimeters apart.

George's helmet was dusted with ice, but did not possess the frosted rime of escaped air. Leaning in as close as she could, Yarrow touched the tip of her laser to his helmet, then pressed its handle against her own.

"George, can you hear me? I'm trying to dig you out. You don't need your radio to respond."

No sound, not even the ragged susurrus of injured breathing. Yarrow thought of something.

"I don't know your relationship with the Voice from the *Centaur*, but it can't hear you from here. Didn't even know what happened to you. It untied me so I could haul you back, but if there's anything you have to say that you don't want it to hear, now's the time."

No response. Yarrow wondered if George was being cagy, or just dead. It wasn't easy to breach the integrity of a clensuit, but tectonic forces, even those of a comet, might suffice.

She climbed out of the hole she had dug, found a piece of wallboard, and sliced it into long rectangles. Returning to her hole (which was slowly filling) she resumed digging, using the boards as crude bulwarks. She didn't check her watch; but by the time she had finished she had drained her suit's store of fruit juice and was feeling aching tremors in her arms and back. George's upper body lay exposed at the bottom of a three-sided well; Yarrow had shucked her jetpack and most of her hand tools in order to reach past him in the narrow confines. She touched her forefinger to the display stud on George's chest and read the numbers on her helmet display.

George's body temperature was 31°C. The hypothermia of shock, or the clensuit warming a cooling corpse?

Yarrow had, in fact, little doubt. George's chest seemed misshapen, and one shoulder plainly dislocated. She looped a cord under his arms, clambered to the top of her makeshift caisson, and slowly hauled him out.

Returning to the glideline, Yarrow felt his deadweight bouncing at the end of the cord, a helium balloon she did not glance back at. She secured the cord to the grip, grabbed its strap, and shoved herself briskly along the rail.

Belatedly she thought to activate her recorder, which would be examined at mission's end. "Seventeen forty-three," she said, "returning with body of George Chow, who was crushed when the fissure at Site Sixteen closed up. Possibly the shock of our landing stressed the ice; how long does it take for such pressure to work through supercold cometary material?"

Yarrow started to erase the last words, then remembered that mission tapes could not be altered. She tried to speak more carefully.

"The control exerted over my suit by the Voice that addressed me in the cabin does not seem to extend far beyond the ship. I do not understand its mechanism, and shall not speculate. Since it did not know what had befallen George, I imagine—"

Something grabbed her from behind. Yarrow shrieked, releasing the grip as a second arm snaked around her helmet, blocking her view.

Yarrow snatched at the arms, unthinkingly moving to break their grip on her throat. But the hands were scrabbling down her suit chest as though seeking to paw her breasts. She grabbed a wrist as its hand closed on her display stud and pulled it away.

Shifting her center of gravity, Yarrow moved to throw the figure over

her shoulder, but microgravity marred her reflexes. The exertion spun her around, and she found herself face to face with George's clensuit. Before she could react, its interior helmet light came on, illuminating a visor splashed with blood and a pallid face beyond, eyes bulging and crust-ed lips agape as if horrified to be dead.

Yarrow screamed and kicked out, driving her foot against the suit's chest even as it groped for her own. The clensuited figure flew backward and rebounded on its cord, but Yarrow found herself receding rapidly as though the gliderail, the clensuit, and the ground beneath them were a video image contracting as the POV drew smoothly back. With a start she realized that she was leaving the comet's surface.

She flailed, but there was nothing to grasp, no purchase to gain. A dozen meters away, the clensuited figure was fumbling with its cord, waving its free arm in a wide sweep. Yarrow took an instant to wonder why it wasn't watching her in triumph or dismay, then gave herself over to panic.

No roar of engines, no whistle of atmosphere. The horizon was visible now, an uneven but perceptible curve. Yarrow was leaving the Teardrop on an almost straight path, and the ground was falling away rapidly.

She aimed her transmitter at the icefields below, hoping that a relay dish lay within direct sight. "Onboard: Emergency," she said. "Am leaving Teardrop at apparent escape velocity. Acknowledge."

Response would be instantaneous if it came at all, but she waited long seconds before dejection hit her. The Voice had plainly suborned the On-board, assuming that her message had reached the ship at all. The duster would come after her only if it chose to do so.

With a small start, Yarrow realized that her recorder was still on. "I suppose you heard all that," she remarked. She spent a minute calming herself by describing what had happened, then switched off. Should she have to leave a farewell message, she would take some care in composing it.

Her rate of ascent, she knew, was gradually slowing (if only slightly) under the pull of the Teardrop's gravity. This pull, however, was also weakening with increasing distance, and probably at a faster rate, which meant that she would never slow to a halt and fall back. Yarrow studied the receding comet—now fully visible—with care. It was shrinking almost imperceptibly; conceivably she would go into an elliptical orbit. Of course, this would do her little good if the rotational period proved to last days or weeks.

No training course had counseled this, but Yarrow had watched enough videos as a child to know what to do. Her clensuit held a pressurized oxygen reserve, which could allow her an hour's breathing if her recyclers failed. A hose permitted her to feed air into another's suit in emergencies. Yarrow fumbled out the hose, aimed it directly away from the Teardrop, and opened the valve.

The rush of escaping gas distantly reached her ears. Inertia leaned into her, compelling her to control the hose with both hands. She called up a grid on her visor and watched the outline of the Teardrop against it, willing the direction of drift to stop and reverse itself. By the time she was certain she could see this, the reserve tank was 83 percent empty.

"Don't know my own strength," she muttered. Wild Boys tended to have strongly developed leg muscles. She had once imagined that this could get her in trouble.

Her helmet light, playing across the dark expanse below her, found the gliderail, a thread of reflective silver. Yarrow cut off the spray and ran her beam along the rail's length. After a moment she found it, and jumped up visor magnification to get a clearer image: George's clensuit, moving with slow deliberation, pushing itself toward the duster. Despite moving within an illuminated circle, it did not look up.

She was drifting toward the comet with dreamlike slowness, an orbital-ballistic dance outside the frenetic pace of human time. Yarrow positioned the hose and opened the valve once again.

The results were startling: the pressure gauge spun down to 0 almost immediately, but she felt only slight acceleration. Of course, she thought with awful realization: the remaining oxygen would exert less pressure. There was a law of physics concerning that.

George was growing steadily in her beam, a long, still figure nosing against the rail like a feeding fish. She would miss him on her present course, though not by much: her work outside the *Lotus* had sharpened her spatial hand-eye skills.

The tip of the duster appeared over the horizon, a clean parabola breaking the irregular salience. Yarrow swore aloud. If the shambling *kuei* made it to the ship, she was dead.

Some part of her had been readying for this. She opened the programmer of her clensuit, overrode its safeguards, and sealed the respirer membrane of her recycler. With the CO₂ awaiting catalysis into carbon and oxygen thus isolated, she pumped it into the reserve tank. It made a dismayingly low-pressure mix, so she drained off nitrogen to supplement it. Her ears popped as the air pressure in the helmet went down.

Working quickly, Yarrow drove the gas mixture through a heating coil, then shunted its thrashing molecules back into the reserve tank. Aiming the hose carefully, she overlaid a bull's eye on her visor, sited the *kuei* at its center, and released the nozzle. Her lungs began to itch.

The nozzle, hissing for scant seconds, faded into silence. Yarrow used its last puff to correct her course, aiming at a point on the rail ahead of the gliding figure. She took a deep breath, but the urgency signaled by her lungs did not abate. "Watch this," she whispered to the tape.

The clensuited legs came up at her like a docking boom. Arms extended, Yarrow struck hard, clutching them before she had a chance to regis-

ter impact. A second later came a harder blow: the cord securing George to the grip yanked taut and held. She felt her teeth rattle, but had no time to react: George's clensuit, with more than human speed, was swarming over her.

Hands clawed for her chest, as she had expected. She knocked one away, grabbed the other wrist and tried to spin the suit around. The *kuei* lacked George's strength, an advantage. Another: it was tethered to the cord, while Yarrow was free. The dolly was singing down the gliderail like a runaway train, exerting a steady pull on the clensuit's movements.

Yarrow grabbed the suit from behind, pressing her chest against it to protect her display studs. George's suit began to wriggle about with inhuman pliancy, and she tightened her grasp. Something gave softly under her grasp, and she nearly let go with a shriek.

She didn't dare let go to pull out her air hose; even as black spots began to bloom against her visor, but it proved unnecessary. Indicator lights on her visor display abruptly changed, and a second later she felt cool air against her face. Dizzily she realized that her clensuit, sensing the proximity of a second unit, had extruded the hose like a proboscis and fixed it upon George's emergency tank. She drank in her first breath in wonder, willing her arms clenched.

The clensuit sensed what was happening. It writhed frantically, then leaned forward to bump helmets with her.

"Yarrow, for God's sake! You'll kill me if you take my air!" The voice echoed in her helmet, tinny but recognizable.

This was not George. George Chow was dead.

"For God's sake, Yarrow, leave off! My recycler's crippled; I'm on the tank, too." His voice was weak and pained. "I can't control the suit, but that's no reason to kill me!"

Abruptly she released him, and immediately drew back a hand and pushed him away. Connected by the air hose to Yarrow and by the cord to the dolly, the *kuei* danced for a second like a suit on a clothesline, then reached quickly for the hose. The creature had it crimped in one hand, cutting off the air flow, and was reaching for Yarrow's chest with the other when she got out her laser and sliced through the cord.

The suit went dead instantly, an unstrung puppet. The whine of the dolly was abruptly gone, and the air flow returned with a puff. Yarrow was drifting, weapon raised, tied loosely to a corpse.

Below her the dolly glided on, unhindered by its flailing cargo. Yarrow looked to the horizon. From ground level, the duster was not yet visible. Had the clensuit gotten close enough to make visual contact with the duster's transmitter, the Voice might have been able to reassert control.

Heart pounding, Yarrow forced herself to put away the laser. Slowly she pulled the limp clensuit toward her, watching lest it move. She pulled at the cord looped under its arms and examined the burnt end. It was strong

work cord, adequate for hauling large masses; but its core was a woven crystal of conducting nanofiber, capable of carrying a substantial dataload.

Yarrow looked to the gliderail, intact and rigid in the deep chill of High Neptune Orbit. She was suddenly certain that it could serve as a super-conductor.

Pulling the clensuit toward her, Yarrow took its jetpack and fired a spurt skyward. She grasped the suit's wrist as they drifted gently to the ground, bumping against each other like tired drunks. Feeling like a ghoul, she lashed the clensuit to the ice, securing the cord with self-driving pitons she took from a storage shed nearby. A mobile bot could still come and cut the suit free, hauling it back into transmitter range, but she didn't plan on giving it time.

Walking the Teardrop was easy if one didn't mind the pace: Yarrow's boots extruded barbed cleats that gripped the ice, permitting an easy if jerky gait. She strode away from the duster, looking about cautiously for transmitters. She tried to snap off her suit antenna, but couldn't reach it.

"Clensuit: display suit functions," she ordered. A row of green bars appeared along the bottom of her faceplate. She asked the system to report suit pressure verbally. "Point nine seven three millibars," it replied.

Yarrow found it mildly comforting that she could talk to something, even if only her clensuit. "Uplink," she ventured, but the system could find no satellite in the skies above. The notion of anything orbiting this frozen globule seemed merely foolish.

Something niggled at her memory, and Yarrow looked across the horizon, wondering what it was. She glanced to her left, turning nearly in a circle to catch what had snagged her subconscious, but her helmet beam disclosed only the soft limbs of ice, eroded by the millennia's micrometeorites.

"You out there, Mister Man?" she called. "You got something to say, I'm listening."

Triton rose behind her, bright enough to cast shadows. When full—it was now in three-quarters phase—the moon shone like a shaded lightbulb, sometimes the same size, and nearly as bright, as the Sun. It was hard to believe that the brilliant globe was the coldest place in the solar system, reflecting back all light and keeping none for itself.

At once a wave of weariness rose and struck her. Both feet anchored, Yarrow swayed like a nodding reed. "Time?" she asked, realizing with a start that she didn't know within hours.

"Nineteen thirty-one," her suit told her. Five hours since Touchdown, scarcely a full day. After a few seconds she realized that her exertions were nonetheless adequate to tire her.

In microgravity one can sleep in any position. Yarrow felt her eyes close, and wondered vaguely whether her exposed position left her vulnerable. She imagined the duster lifting off the comet's surface, coming

after her . . . no other danger seemed credible, save the sparse but inescapable sleet of tiny particles, every grain moving fast enough to puncture her suit, perhaps punch through her body entirely, like a cosmic ray tearing through a choromosome. . . .

"Warning: power supply low," the suit said abruptly. Yarrow started awake, looking about wildly as a dream-threat receded rapidly from conscious recall. Her helmet beam swung across a darkened landscape (Triton was gone from the sky), disclosing nothing but still ice. Collecting her thoughts, she asked for the suit functions display.

Suit power, a squat green bar a few hours ago, now stood at 18 percent capacity, low enough that the display lined it in orange. Guiltily Yarrow realized that her present anchored position was permitting heat to leach into the ice underfoot, which would not have been possible had she thought to tie a tether and doze drifting.

Cursing softly, she pulled herself free and began to stamp across the ice as though to warm herself. She remembered passing a powerbox earlier, and retraced her steps until she saw it on the horizon, an unpolished cube atop a stalk no wider than her finger. She paused before plugging in—could the Voice have entered the powerbox and set a trap?—but could finally see no alternative. As she brought her belt close to the nearest face, a cable snaked out from her suit and attached itself to the featureless surface. "Recharge in progress," the suit told her.

She was sitting on the cube, imagining herself still wholly awake, when her helmet trilled that it was detecting a radio signal. Yarrow came to her senses with a start as her system caught the frequency.

" . . . there? George, Yarrow, please rep—"

Recognizing the voice, Yarrow began to answer, but her suit queeped suddenly and flashed a reply code before her eyes. Yarrow swore.

"—can hear us. We cannot read any—" Tsujimoto stopped as she received the burst from Yarrow's clensuit. Silence followed, as she presumably went away to tell someone.

Yarrow checked the code number against the suit's directory, but she was pretty sure what had been sent. The clensuit had prevented her from replying because of its low energy levels, and instead had sent a three-bit burst, which signified acknowledgment of a message when the recipient was unable to respond for technical reasons. She wondered what the *Lotus* would make of it.

Bemusedly Yarrow searched the sky, wondering what source had hailed her. The *Lotus* could not communicate directly with clensuits across thousands of clicks, so used orbital comsats. Evidently one was overhead, circling the Teardrop in a high, slow orbit (this icechip could hardly retain it otherwise) that just now brought it over the horizon. One would have expected two comsats in such circumstances, one overhead at all times, but perhaps the Voice had disabled the other.

"Yarrow," Tsujimoto said, "get back to the duster as soon as you are able. Since you didn't signal an emergency, I assume you merely—"

Recharge Malfunction, her faceplate said in flashing red. The system chimed once, and a series of numbers began to crawl across her field of vision.

"—automatic takeoff. Please reply as soon as you are able."

Yarrow cried "Hold!" to the systems display, but heard over her voice the trill that signaled downlink disconnection. Glowing codes hung frozen before her till she banished them.

"System, can you repeat that message?" she asked. The system, unsurprisingly, could not. "Doesn't matter," she said to herself. It was the other news that actually concerned her.

Grimly Yarrow recalled the codes and studied them. The fault, according to her clensuit, lay in the powerbox: something was preventing its proper discharge. Her system duly listed the various attempts it had made to overcome this, none of which Yarrow was competent to judge. At the bottom of the list appeared the results of its efforts: Suit power was now at 21.3 percent.

"At present expenditure levels, how long until suit failure?" she asked the system.

"Lethal failure in two point six hours," her suit replied.

Walking on the surface, of course, would accelerate energy expenditure. Yarrow sighed, then ordered her suit to heat up a cup of strong tea. Swallowing a mouthful of fruit paste, she told herself to wake up, then set about finding the trail of cleat-marks that would lead her back to the duster.

"Recorder on," she said. Between sips of tea she recounted recent events, including her suspicion that the Voice had managed to disrupt the emergency powerboxes. "It's a cold way to die," she remarked bitterly. She felt a stab of envy for Chow, dispatched to eternity by the grinding hydrodynamics of a true if tiny world.

Yarrow found a second powerbox near the excavation site, but was again unable to coax current from it. If the Voice had sent her blacked-out clensuit to establish connections extending its control over the power grid, she would not be able to undo it from here. She followed the branching gliderail back toward the duster, taking care not to touch it.

"There it is," she said as the craft's rounded tip broke the ragged horizon. No searchlight shone, but Yarrow was certain that the ship's instrumentation could detect her. She decided to leave the recorder on, an unwashed creek bed that the next few minutes would etch.

Like an enemy fortress, the duster loomed up in the night sky, discernible as much by the stars it occluded as by their dim reflection. Yarrow approached cautiously, trying to remember where she had stood when clensuit control was wrested from her. She had been only a few

steps from the hatch—which did not guarantee that the Voice's range of control did not extend farther.

"Hello the Ship," Yarrow ventured. There was no reply. She hailed the Onboard electronically, and was rewarded with a standard acknowledgment. Emboldened, she ordered the hatch to open.

Nothing happened.

Yarrow took a breath and started forward. "Advancing slowly," she reported. In fact she was approaching in a wide spiral, like a housebreaker looking for a back entrance. The ground beneath the hatch showed smooth plate like a paved walkway, which she avoided. The duster's three legs nestled snugly into the docking collar's fitted recesses, holding the craft fast as though against a hurricane. Yarrow considered climbing one, then remembered that the yaw rockets rested atop each.

A stack of leftover material stood beside the landing platform, and she picked up a meter-long metal rod and secured it to her belt. Finger-sized joint fasteners lay discarded nearby, which she stuffed into her pouch. She wondered if the Voice was observing this, and whether it would realize what she was about. Quickly she stood, took half a step toward the craft, then flexed her knees lightly and hopped.

She rose lazily, drifting past the rocket nozzles with aching slowness, but continued with almost undiminished momentum to the tip of the duster and beyond. She was three times the ship's height before she felt herself slow at last to a stop and hang over the starlit icescape, as though her body were straining to detect the comet's faint gravity.

Her descent began almost imperceptibly, allowing her ample time to study its path. Deciding that she would overshoot the duster by several meters, she took out a fastener and flung it away on a flat tangent. Her course seemed little altered by this, and she hurled two more into her path, wishing she had something more massive. Below her, the antenna complex protruded like an askew weathervane from the duster's smooth surface. She was descending toward the duster's bow, a featureless hemisphere that would permit no purchase. Coming down lightly, Yarrow kicked off with one foot, sending her up a few meters in the proper direction. The antenna passed below her, a tangle of electronics like a wind-gnarled tree growing from a stony outcrop. She had her cord ready in one hand, but it proved unnecessary; her outstretched arm snagged a boom and she pulled herself in.

"The vulture's perch," she muttered, reaching down to feel among the instrumentation. Upon waking she had realized that the Voice must be controlling the ship's Onboard remotely, so could be balked by disabling its receivers. Looping the cord around a strut, she secured the other end to her belt, then braced her feet and hefted the metal rod. She identified a vulnerable spot behind the antenna dish, swung back the rod, and brought it down hard.

The shock of the blast threw her backward, every thought knocked from her head. The clensuit was shrilling, but Yarrow didn't hear it. A timeless interval followed, of effortless floating and absence of pain or thought. It was only when she bounced, once and then again, and came lightly to rest on a rough chilly surface that the world of inevitable consequence returned.

Get up. It was an urgent voice, more intimate than the clensuit's in her ear. Yarrow groaned, although pain had not yet arrived.

You're dying, get up. It seemed a non sequitur, and Yarrow puzzled slightly, as one might recall an odd remark from the night before. *Don't die not fighting: Up.*

The pain came then, like sunshine burning through fog. The underside of her body was growing quite cold, which was welcome, since every joint and sinew ached as though sawn. This was wrong, Yarrow thought confusedly; and then sharper pain sliced through the gauze of her befuddlement.

Up, yes. Getting up was easy in microgravity; and the cold seeping through the ice (she realized that she was lying on the ground) was beginning to ache on the peripheries of numbness. Yarrow rose to a sitting position and nearly cried out. The searing gust raced beneath her suit like a flame.

Her faceplate glowed dimly with electronic noise, and her suit's joints moved with difficulty. The clensuit was dead, its systems fried. Standing unsteadily, Yarrow could feel her soles chilling, while the rest of her body failed to warm.

Something brushed against her thigh, and she held up the end of her cord, its ragged end charred. Had she not been tethered by it, the shock of the blast might have thrown her into escape orbit. Or possibly the voltage would have killed her outright.

She might well be dead in another minute, anyway.

The ship; in. Yarrow turned until she saw the ship, a dozen meters away and seemingly unchanged in the dim light. The antenna, of course, had been destroyed by the surge the Voice had sent through it. *Never mind that now. In or die here.* Her air was growing stale, and cold.

Three low leaps brought her to the docking collar. She did not trouble to avoid the metal plating, through which the Voice had earlier taken over her suit. Having destroyed the antenna, it had lost access to the ship, a limb it had sawn off to see her fall.

She could not send a radio signal to open the airlock, but the hatch possessed manual controls. Swarming up the ladder, oblivious to the pain in her hands but alert to the worsening air, Yarrow reached the control pad and tapped out the emergency entry code.

Nothing happened.

Yarrow didn't think, didn't wait for the orders in her ear. The screw-

driver in her glove would not extrude, but she was able to work it out with her finger, like a child pushing out a splinter. The threads holding the coverplate in place would not respond to random vibration, but the microscopic pressure sensors lining the helices detected the directed effort of a tool blade and allowed the screws to turn. Four screws off, and the coverplate drifted free.

Yarrow reached in with her right hand. She had not manipulated the release for the explosive bolts in three years, but they had made her perform the act repeatedly and in the dark, and with the handle's touch she remembered what to do. A half twist clockwise, pull, and a quarter twist back while pushing down: the hull shuddered once. When she withdrew her hand and ran it across the hatch, she felt its edge raised several centimeters.

With the blood roaring in her ears, Yarrow pulled open the hatch and squeezed in. The inner door opened manually; firing the bolts had released its switches. A blast of air rushed past her as she slid it open, like the soul escaping from a violated body.

Darkness within, not even the glow of displays. Of course: before withdrawing from the duster, the Voice had pithed its Onboard. The doors could not be made to close behind her; the air system would not come on.

The spare suit. Was it her angel speaking, or merely the voice of her training? Yarrow didn't wonder. The cabin was too small to get lost in; she felt her way across the wall, hands sliding along smooth displays. Behind the pilot's seat, the cabinet panel snapped open when she twisted its handle. She pulled out the bunched suit, fumbling for its belt.

No air left. She activated the other suit, embracing it like a withered friend in less need of succor than she. The hiss of oxygen was very cold.

Fingers stiffening, Yarrow activated the helmet light on the spare suit. Stowed in an insulated compartment, it had been impervious to the Voice's devastations, and its beam came on at once. Her faceplate was milky with frost, and the plume of her breath added more. With a curse she killed the light, then wrapped the limp suit round her neck, knotting its limbs like a sash.

Working by touch, she found the proper switch beneath the pilot's seat, thinking with etched clarity that whether she lived or died turned freely upon this moment. A second after she pushed the control a faint light came on behind her.

Yarrow pushed herself backward, looking for the welcome glow of cabin displays. A string of pilot lights shone dimly through the haze of her visor, like stars through Neptune's rings. She kicked closer, wondering why there were not more of them, and heard the joints of her skins crackle.

This decided her. Maneuvering again by touch she found the airlock, and discovered that it had slid shut with the reawakening of the system. She fumbled back to the pilot's chair and felt for the manual controls, but

could not discern their settings. As a calming languor stole over her, Yarrow found the helmet of the empty clensuit, pressed it against her own, and asked: "Can you get this ship into the air?"

If the suit's system replied, she did not hear it. A great force pressed down upon her, crushing the chill air from her lungs. Yarrow felt her spirit being squeezed from her body, and braced at last for death. But the compression simply went on, as though some stretched sinew yet bound her to her battered frame, and she felt the contending surges of numbness and pain, knowing that the latter meant that she was alive.

It was a cold crossing. The duster's system, shut down by the Voice, lay beyond the reach of the clensuit, and the cabin remained unpressured and unheated. The empty suit heated the air it piped into Yarrow's helmet, but it could not restore the functioning of her own dead system, and she shivered and moaned through the hours of passage.

The spare clensuit could run just enough of the duster to set a course for the *Lotus*. Communication was impossible, as the antenna was melted into a single mass. The cabin shone dimly, resolved into clearer darkness as the frost in her helmet slowly melted. With every breath, however, Yarrow saw a chilly plume, and reflected that if she were warmer she would doubtless hurt more.

All that Yarrow was able to derive from the ship's Onboard was the last order left in its registers: to deploy its limited microrepair facilities to rebuild the antenna. Puzzling over this, she realized that the Voice wished to eliminate the evidence that it had killed her. Had her body been recovered, another frozen island in High Neptune Orbit, it would have seemed to have fallen victim to a mishap when recharging from a powerbox. With the antenna replaced and control over the duster restored, the Voice could no doubt contrive to discharge one of the boxes in a catastrophic surge.

During her stronger moments she wondered what was happening on the *Centaur*, and once made an attempt to establish radio contact with the *Lotus* through the working clensuit's system. Then her thirst would rise up, and she would hold up the clensuit helmet like a skull and yearn for a way to reach its stores of juice and water. Weakness and pain would overwhelm her, and she would weep silently, regret the death of Chow, and fear for the future until she had rocked herself into exhaustion.

No displays shone in the cabin, and Yarrow's dead suit would not even report the passage of time. Perhaps the duster had repaired its antenna, and could be steered safely to the *Lotus* by remote pilot. Otherwise the clensuit's modest system would bring the craft as close as possible and then try to kill relative velocity. Dozing in fits, Yarrow wondered how many hours had passed.

She was asleep when the engines came on, and had to snatch at the

clensuit before it was torn from her grasp. "Status report!" she cried, touching helmets; but the system's capacities were already fully occupied. Yarrow sought to ready herself as deceleration woke drowsing injuries, but excitement splintered her resolve.

A series of irregular bursts from the secondaries was bringing the craft around, but Yarrow could not calculate its orientation. It was only when the ship bumped once with a muffled clang that she knew herself docked. A mechanical whine sounded somewhere beneath her couch: emergency probes sounding the crippled ship.

A minute later the outer airlock opened, then the inner door slid roughly aside. The blast of air that broke into the cabin flapped the limbs of the clensuit, and a world of sound swirled about her again. Yarrow worked the manual seals on her helmet with trembling fingers, and tore it off with a scream of relief at the warm fresh puff in her face.

Footsteps ran outside the airlock, but Yarrow, fumbling desperately with the second helmet's seals, was too busy to look up. Pencils of light wavered in the dirty air, bright circles sliding over the displays. When one caught Yarrow in the face she looked up blinking, a water tube trailing from the opened faceplate into her mouth.

"Sweet Jesus!" a familiar voice cried. Yarrow had not known that Tsujimoto was a Christian. The cabin lights slowly came up as the *Lotus*' emergency systems took control of the damaged ship. As the torch's glare faded into the ambient glow she looked in confusion from Tsujimoto's intent expression—bereft of relief or concern—to the tool she held in her other hand. It took Yarrow a second to realize that she was looking at a gun.

They locked her in a small room created for that purpose, as though to put her into her own quarters would detract from the gravity of the situation. Communication with others was forbidden her, another symbolic sanction, or did they think she would seek to sway witnesses? In the hours between her long periods of sleep, Yarrow decided that some incriminating message had been fabricated by the Voice, Chow crying murder or some routine broadcast that contradicted the chronology of the account she had given. In addition (or so Yarrow guessed during her debriefing), conditions on the *Centaur* were still unknown, which left everyone frightened.

"Are you listening?" she once asked the featureless walls, but knew that if anyone was, it was not her captors. At regular intervals a slot appeared in one wall and a food tray peeped forth. Yarrow could not determine the intervals between meals—was it constitutional to deny a prisoner knowledge of the passage of time?—but guessed that she was being fed when everyone else was. Eight meals thus meant three days.

When they came for her she coldly requested a shower, which was granted after an uneasy exchange of glances. She was escorted down the

passageway by two colleagues while Chin stuck his head into the stall, presumably to confirm that none of the fixtures could be broken off and used as a weapon. Left alone, Yarrow soaped herself extravagantly, expending three times a day's fair water ration. She guessed that no one would bring themselves to bang on the door.

Her judges were assembled in the common room, which had been stripped of amenities in order to accommodate their crowded numbers. Ling, Tsujimoto, Yarrow's own superior Deng, a pilot who spent most of his time in space, and two Han-faced Slavs, probably lovers, who always kept the same shift, sat facing her in severe silence. Yarrow tried to remember whether six constituted a board of inquiry or a tribunal.

The male Slav (his name tag read "Vrdolyak") lifted slightly the gavel that identified him as chair. Yarrow expected him to convene the meeting with an official declaration, but his only words—"Tell us what you say happened," as he pointed at her—made clear that the session was long in progress. Panic fluttered up in her chest: she was to be told nothing.

Carefully she recounted her ordeal, which she had pondered and rehearsed in her days of confinement. At times she would allude to what her listeners must have determined from other evidence—"As the tape shows," or "Which you will note from the antenna"—and look for a sign of acknowledgment in their eyes. At her mention of the Voice Ling looked faintly quizzical, Vrdolyak frowned. No one else's expression told her anything.

When she finished, the six looked at her silently, not exchanging glances. After a few seconds Vrdolyak stirred slightly and said, "Thank you." He touched the side of his chair, and the door opened behind her.

Yarrow stared. "You mean that's it? You haven't even told me what's going on!" Her two escorts appeared on either side of her, one of them touching her elbow. She shook them loose furiously. "Is this a trial? I have the right to an advocate!"

"This is not a criminal proceeding," said Vrdolyak. "The crew does not have the authority to convene such." Tsujimoto murmured something, and he added, "Should criminal charges be brought, you will have access to an advocate and all your legal rights."

"Charges for *what*?" she shouted. "You haven't told me what I'm being accused of!" Vrdolyak began to speak, but she overrode him. "And don't tell me that you haven't brought criminal charges: *why am I under arrest*?"

Vrdolyak flushed brick red. "You are being held under emergency statutes," he said curtly. "Constitutional civil liberties may be suspended during emergency conditions."

They stared at each other.

"You mean that's it?" she demanded, incredulous. "There's an emergency, you don't have to tell me what because it supersedes my right to

know, and you can lock me up without telling me why on the same basis? You know that everything I said is supported by the tape."

"Your suit tape was damaged by electrical discharge, and cannot be easily played," said Deng heavily. "We are employing scanning techniques to reconstruct what we can."

Yarrow leaped to her feet. "No!" she cried. Hands grabbed at her. "Can't you see what you're doing?" She was pulled backward as her escorts clumsily overpowered her. Shouting, she was dragged out the door as her judges stared impassively.

In her solitude, she considered how things must look. What would the "restored" tape show? Something baldly incriminating? She decided not; it would suffice if recovered portions of the tape contradicted the account she had given. She spent more time pondering what a team sent to the comet would find. An autopsy would disclose the order in which the injuries to George's body had been inflicted, and which ones had occurred posthumously. Would Castor send a physician to study the body *in situ*, or would they ship it back first, or—she caught her breath at the thought—would they leave its examination to expert systems? She could not believe that the CP would conduct a murder investigation without having a human examine the victim.

She was drinking tea (delivered through a hatch no wider than the pot) when a door opened in the ceiling and Ling floated through. Yarrow stared, not sure what to say, then gestured apologetically. "I only have one cup."

"That's all right, thank you." Ling was embarrassed—no, her pinched expression bespoke something more: she was, Yarrow realized, frightened. Yarrow wondered whether she feared assault.

She pushed herself down to the wall that Yarrow was using as floor, and sat with her crossed ankles adhering to the clingstrip. Yarrow looked at her questioningly.

"They asked me," she began, "to tell you what they have decided."

Her weakness lent Yarrow strength. "Verdict or sentence?" she asked caustically.

Ling flinched. "Neither," she said. "You know they can't do that."

"I thought they could do anything during an emergency. This is an emergency, I gather."

Ling hung her head in acknowledgment of others' dereliction. "You should have been told everything. Perhaps they did not want you to realize how little we ourselves know. Transmissions from the Ship are . . . unreliable. There is little we truly know. . . ."

"And you are not supposed to tell me that much. I see. So no one dares to hang me until they know which way the wind is blowing?"

"No!" Ling looked up, shocked. "We know too little to decide anything at all, and to disregard what we heard of you would be a vital decision. And after what happened on the comet, well—" She squared her shoulders.

ders, resolute at last. "So it was decided to do nothing; to put you on ice, as someone said."

Yarrow lifted an eyebrow. "You're going to keep me locked up indefinitely, in my own room with security measures? I'm surprised the *Lotus* can spare the resources."

"We can't." Now Ling would not meet her eye. "You might try to escape, and we cannot maintain staff forever on standby against this possibility. So you are going to be Chilled, till the emergency is over."

Yarrow stared, then flung herself at Ling with a scream. The technician threw up her arms in alarm, but there was no strength in Yarrow's spring: her bunched legs unfolded like paper flowers blooming in water, and her hands reached out with dreamlike slowness. A hatch banged open behind her, and Yarrow was unable to look around before a sticky substance enveloped her.

"No!"

Ling was scuttling backward on all fours, eyes wide. The web tightened around Yarrow, binding her limbs to her sides, but strength fled her from within: blearily she realized that she had been drugged. "No," she cried, horror rising about her like water. "Don't let them—Ling! *Don't let them freeze me! No—!*"

There was no light in the icebox, yet Yarrow experienced not darkness but the vibrant non-color that bespoke "fingerprinting," direct stimulation of the striatic cortex. The visual center offered the broadest gate to the city, open now to invaders she could neither see nor debar. Her calmness suggested that sedatives had already crossed the blood-brain barrier.

The neutral screen resolved into an empty landscape, pale sky above featureless ground. Yarrow suspected that she was projecting upon sensory deprivation: the line of the horizon seemed suspiciously arbitrary. The sky looked cold, about to snow; perhaps the cryopreservative was already entering her veins.

Rime etched itself across the sky, which took on depth: Yarrow was inside a snow crystal, watching interstices thicken about her like an involuting fractal. She knew that the Chills were not actually frozen, but cooled to a level beyond hibernation, where dreaming ceased and mental activity stalled to a vegetable muttering impossible to recall. A cocoon was being woven about her mind, packing material for the descent into inanimation.

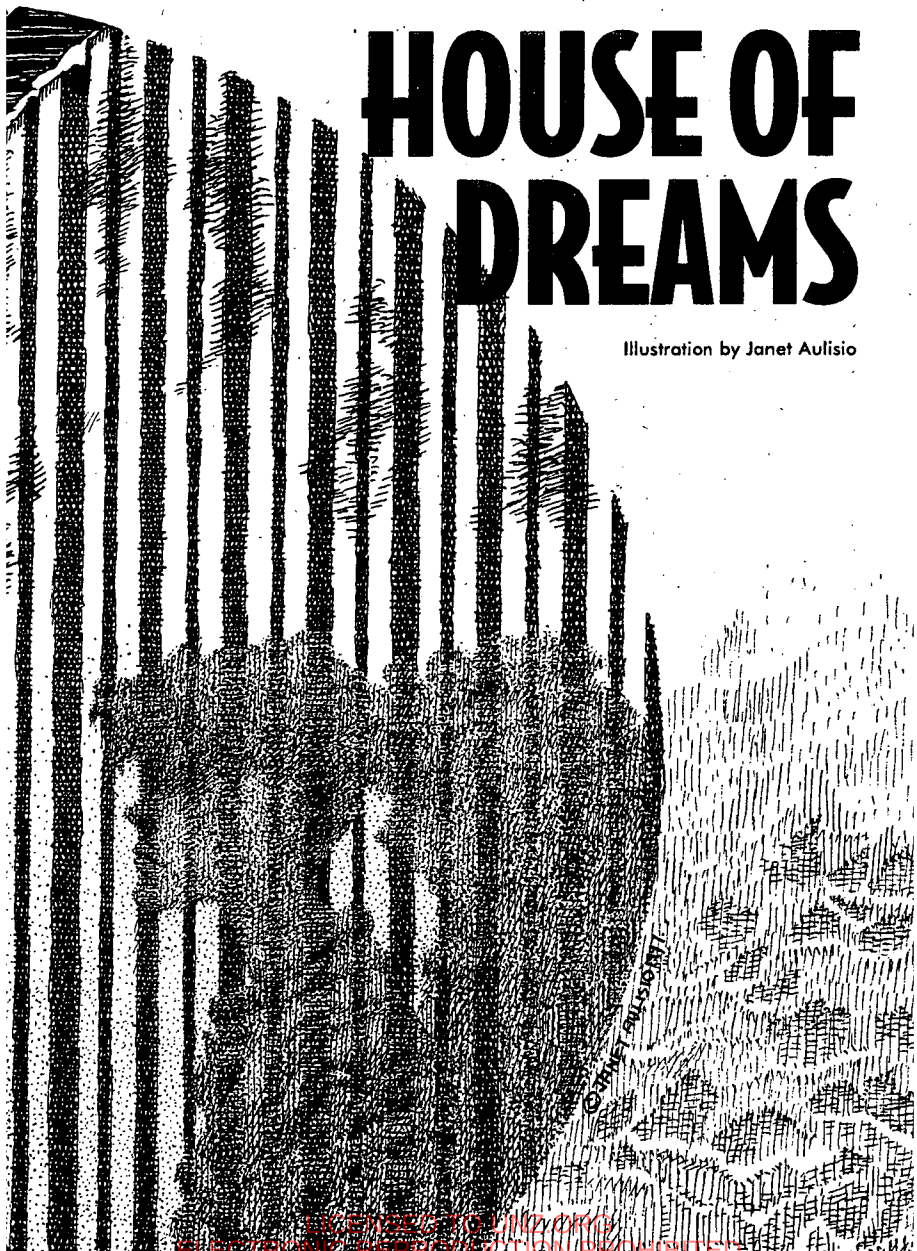
"You're coming, aren't you?" she asked. No terror tinged her voice; at the still, cooling center of things, serenity comes naturally. "Will you make yourself known to me, or shall you wait until I am inert, clay beneath your hands?" A faint wind sighed on the edge of hearing, bringing no sound of approach. A seeping chill spread further, settling things into orderly stillness as Yarrow composed herself to await her vanquisher. ●



Michael F. Flynn

HOUSE OF DREAMS

Illustration by Janet Aulisio



NO PART OF THIS BOOK
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Michael F. Flynn's stories have appeared in *Analog*, *F&SF*, and elsewhere. He has been a three-time Hugo award finalist—most recently for his novella, "Melodies of the Heart" (*Analog*, January 1994). His most recent works include a novel of the near future, *Firestar* (Tor, 1996), and a collection of short tales, *The Forest of Time and Other Stories* (Tor, April 1997). The sequel to the former book, *Rogue Star*, will be out from Tor next spring. "House of Dreams" is the author's first tale for *Asimov's*.

Sometimes, when the light is right, or the angle, you can see the shades of other worlds. There is a spot off Sandy Hook where graceful ships of unknown design sail past the double-turreted lighthouse. Near Rittenhouse Square in Philadelphia, residents on Waverly Place claim that elegant but oddly dressed men and women sometimes cross the street. In Michigan, motorists passing the Six Mile Road exit in Livonia report fleeting glimpses of a line of dispirited men walking through pouring rain.

It may be some trick of the light, a peculiar form of polarization. Or it may be some sort of quantum resonance between worldlines abutting. Science is helpless to explain these sights; barely acknowledges their existence. It is not even clear if these are glimpses of what was or what will be or what might have been. Perhaps they are only places where the walls between adjacent universes have worn thin, allowing glimpses through the remaining scrim.

Now that's a cold-blooded way to look at it! What do you know of worldlines abutting or the walls of universes? It's all just words. It may be the heart that sees these things and not the mind; and what the heart sees is not bound by physics.

Ted moved into Pennyworth House one bright April day with two suitcases, full of dreams. No, the suitcases didn't contain dreams (though they did hold architects' renderings and plans) nor did April days (though they are certainly conducive to them). I meant that Ted was full of dreams; or the house was.

The joke about Pennyworth House was that it wasn't. There had been a time when the block was called "Millionaire's Row" and Plainfield was the country refuge of the great textile magnates; but those days are long fled. The mills are overseas now, and Plainfield no longer rural. Even a million dollars isn't what it used to be. But they built solid back then, and age has only seasoned the place. It was that oddly American style we call Puritan-Victorian, extravagant but frowning on excess. Just the sort of house to appeal to the urban homesteader.

Ted laid his suitcases out in the room he and Sharon had chosen as a master bedroom. It was a fine room with a separate sitting area, a dresser and armoire, a four-poster canopy bed that scattered dust when he swatted the draperies. The bed would have to go. It was a bit too old and a bit too used to suit Sharon, though it would do for now while he sorted the furnishings and prepared the house for moving day.

He positioned a family portrait on the dresser facing the bed. That's Ted in the rear, the one with the goofy, unworldly look. Sharon sits in the foreground, with large, prominent eyes and a crown of golden-brown hair. Her arm wraps around Billy, who tries (and fails) to conceal the six-year-old bored look. How can a boy squirm in a still photo? Yet, each time Ted looked at that picture, that kid was in a different position. If it weren't for Sharon's arm holding him, he'd be off the frame entirely.

From the suitcase flap, Ted pulled out pads of colored Post-It notes and the lists that Sharon had given him. There was a lot of old furniture to dispose of before the moving van arrived; and the sooner he got started, the better. Starting in the first floor "parlor," Ted placed green stickers on the items Sharon had decided to keep, and red on those to be donated to the poor. The lists were systematic, arranged by room; but then, Sharon had a lawyer's systematic mind. Ted was more the dreamer, the scientist.

The poor apparently had a desperate need for Victorian bric-a-brac. An umbrella stand—just the thing for a needy household! (Don't laugh. Maybe their roofs leak.) Occasionally, an item puzzled him. A gasogene? A portmanteau? He would need a dictionary to finish this job! Hey, Ted was no mouth-breather! He had his share of degrees. But some things were simply beyond his ken. *Chair with anti-macassars* . . . What was an anti-macassar? Were there pro-macassars? Were macassars anything on which one ought even to take a position?

From time to time, Ted was tempted to switch the red and green stickers. Why toss that footstool but *keep* that monstrosity of a cabinet? But he refrained. Sharon had very firm notions, some internal litmus that separated the fashionably retro from the hopelessly outmoded.

In the basement stairwell, he found a flashlight as long as his forearm hanging in the space between the door and the wall. Ted noticed it because he was searching for the light switch. That was also how he discov-

ered that the electricity hadn't been turned on yet; so it was just as well the flashlight was hanging where it was. Though it would have been better if it hadn't been.

It was surprisingly heavy, even for its size, and he nearly dropped it. Judging by the dust and the pattern of little rust spots, he thought the batteries would be long dead; so the glare almost blinded him when he pressed the stud.

People, that was a flashlight! It was the Mother of All Flashlights. Ted spent a long time blinking away the spots. A light that strong should have illuminated the entire basement. A light that strong should have illuminated Union County. Yet, when he aimed it down the stairs, the colors were dim and washed out; and the stairs, walls, support beams, all had a dull sepia tint, like an old photograph.

A hint of movement at the edge of the light caught his eye. He tried to track it, but saw nothing. But just to be on the safe side, he closed the basement door when he left and made a note to call the exterminators as soon as he had phone service. Sharon would have a fit if she knew there were mice in the house.

He was half-finished with the furniture checklist when the windows faded to twilight gray and the outlines of the furnishings took on a more tentative look. He could have tucked it in then and snuggled into the covers on that canopy bed. He could have waited until morning, finished his inventory by daylight, and had electricity by evening. But what kind of story would that be? Instead, he worked by flashlight until darkness fell entire. And because he had carried it with him from the basement stairwell; he used that mother flashlight.

He was upstairs by then, in one of the small rooms in the south wing. He had thought it unfurnished—just a small table that Sharon had drafted into the War on Poverty—but when he followed the sepia light inside, he saw that someone had co-opted the room. There was a low stool, a drafting table, and, near the window where the sunlight would catch it, an easel bearing an unfinished painting. On a small table nearby were brushes, a dried-out palette, and paint tubes, crimped and squeezed.

Hey, what's going on here? None of that crap was there when the realtor had showed the house! Had someone set up an art studio? In *his* house? And why? (The view wasn't much; but there might be some special quality to the sunlight. Artists were a strange breed. Stranger than physicists or lawyers in some ways.) Ted turned his light on the painting.

People, that was one nasty collection of daubs! Call it impressionistic if you want, but only if you want to make a bad impression. Even in the dull sepia light, it was a horrid dark. Swaths of black and Prussian blue and other dismal hues swirled on the canvas, suggesting a mouth open in

an endless howl. Lurking in the blackness behind it, emergent shapes. Not shapes you could name, or even want to.

The painting both repelled and intrigued, and Ted reached for it. That was how he discovered it wasn't there. His hand closed on nothing, and the unexpectedness of it threw him off balance, and he stumbled forward.

Hear that clatter of easels toppling over? Hear the snap of paintbrushes broken underfoot? Smoke and dreams! *Silence*, that's what you hear. No easel, no brushes, no palette full of colored pastes. Not even (when he waved his hand through the air where the easel seemed to be) his own arm.

People, that was one weird flashlight! It lit up what wasn't there and didn't light what *was*.

Now Ted was a scientist, so while he was surprised and a little uneasy, he was also a little curious. He did cry out, but let's be generous and say he cried, "Wow!", because after he had caught his breath and his heart (which had skittered halfway down the hall before coming back), he set out to discover what the hell was going on.

First, he turned the flashlight off and contemplated the room. The twilight was just strong enough to show that it was indeed empty. He turned the light back on and the room was . . .

Full of furniture. Okay, so the furniture had been chopped up and the wood stacked in the corner; but you could tell that the pieces had once been chairs and drawers and the like. Ted pursed his lips and wondered if his mind was playing tricks, but discarded that hypothesis as inherently untestable.

He tried the light several times, and each time the room was a little different. An empty, cobwebbed room, an artist's studio, stacks of wood. . . . Once, he even saw the furniture intact, a bedroom for two small children. There was no continuity among the glimpses, no order. Hey, if what he saw wasn't real, why *should* it come in any sort of order? The worldlines might not be temporally congruent.

(Temporally congruent? Sure, Ted thought that way all the time. This was *science*, man! But maybe Ted pulled that science around him a little more tightly; because this was not exactly dropping cannonballs from towers or watching gorillas in the mist.)

Naturally, he opened the flashlight up and looked inside. Don't think for a moment he could resist doing that. But, all things considered, he didn't really expect to see a couple of D-cells, and he didn't. Though a pink bunny rabbit could have jumped out beating a drum and it would not have been as perplexing as the mass of gizmos and wiring he *did* see. Some gizmos looked familiar—rather like a whatchamacallit—but the twilight had deepened to the point where most of the mechanism was shrouded in shadow, so he couldn't really tell what was in there.

Did he pull the modules out? Did he lay them out in the fading twilight

so he could study the circuit, find the power source, puzzle out the logic? Fat geese and golden eggs! What kind of fool do you think he *was*? That sepia light might be dim, but Ted wasn't. A lot of things could happen if he tried to take that thing apart, and most of them were not good. That flashlight was heavy, and it wasn't big enough to be so heavy. Whatever powered it, it wasn't a dry cell battery; so he wasn't about to poke around inside.

In the end, he decided to postpone matters until the morning, and made his way along the hallway to the master bedroom, playing the ghostlight on his surroundings. Doors, woodwork, main staircase, wallpaper—most of it looked the same as he remembered from daylight; but he didn't know the house that thoroughly yet, and once he left the south wing, it was too dark to make the comparison by twilight. He saw just one more oddity, but it was a showstopper.

He saw a woman.

She strode right past him, arms swinging, legs pumping, a purposeful stride. (She must have walked right through him; and didn't *that* give Ted pause!) Dark, heavy-looking boots with light-colored, canvas trousers tucked in at the ankles, a dark jacket, unbuttoned and flapping loosely. He didn't see her face, not then. The view was strictly from the rear.

But, oh, what a rear that was! It rolled in five directions. Ted had been married and faithful for seven years—but he wasn't blind. And even though he was a scientist, he never once tried to estimate the relevant equations and boundary conditions for that rolling gait. (A quartic polynomial, since you ask, but there were transcendent elements in there, as well; and the complex and irrational. Unsolvable—as Galois proved. But that's women for you.)

Ted turned the flashlight off, and the darkness enveloped him. Partly he was upset at the impure thoughts that wiggled through his mind. But partly, too, he wanted to check if a real woman was walking through his house at night. You never could tell.

But the dark was also quiet, except for the sometime rattle of the wind on the windowpanes and the odd creak or two of an old building. No footsteps. Nothing he could mistake for footsteps. And when he turned the light back on, the woman was gone.

He checked each of the rooms down that hallway. He checked the back stairwell. He even checked the linen closet. But he caught no further glimpse of her. In the back stairwell, though, he saw a weapons cache. Two crossbows and a clutch of bolts. A stand of bolt-action rifles. A pistol that looked like an automatic. Four cartoon bombs—black spheres with exposed fuses. I don't know who that woman was, people, but I wouldn't mess with her!

Ted found his way back to the master bedroom. The same four-poster was there in the sepia light, in the same position—though maybe the

drapes hung a little differently. But by then he was too tired to do anything but drop on the bed, and too wired to do anything but lie awake.

He woke to sunlight streaming through the tattered drapes. Too strong a sunlight, he quickly discovered, for the ghostlight to overcome. So, he went around the house pulling the drapes and the shades, casting the interior into an artificial twilight in which the flashlight could—just barely—pick out ghostly images.

Exploration convinced Ted that it was the same house he saw, but it was not clear whether it was the house as it was or as it would be. The furniture was mostly the same, though sometimes in different positions, and the wallpaper had not yet begun to peel. That argued for the house-that-was. But the ground-floor windows had been painted black or boarded up, and there was no sign in the real light that any of that had ever happened. That argued for the house-that-would-be. But would Sharon ever replace that horrid, peeling fabric with its identical twin?

He saw the woman again, this time in the master bedroom and late in the afternoon. The sun had moved away from that side of the house, but enough sunlight broached the window shades that the shapes of things that were could be seen through those that weren't—as if the world had been double-exposed. She was a wraith, sitting on the bedside and garbed in a dark, ankle-length dress with oddly placed bows and flaps, and white, decorative borders at the hem, cuffs, and décolletage. Slim, lace-up ankle-boots peeked from the folds of her skirt. Her hair (also dark) was cropped in a page-boy cut—except that it was shaved short in the back, exposing the curve of her neck and jaw and her bangle-less ears. It was no style—either of clothing or hair—that he had ever seen. The hands that covered the woman's face bore stains that might have been dirt or paint or blood.

She was weeping.

For a moment, Ted watched the woman rock to and fro; then, embarrassed at his inadvertent intrusion, he thumbed the switch and plunged the room into darkness. When he turned the light on again, the room was empty and ghostly cobwebs draped a ghostly bed.

Ted went back to tagging the furniture after that, but I have to tell you, his mind wasn't on it, and maybe he put some green tags where he was supposed to put red. Hey, why throw away a perfectly good gasogene? And maybe he really did forget to get the phone connected and the lights turned on. Or maybe he just wanted to sit alone in the dark again that night.

Ted was in the kitchen when the real light dimmed and a phantom kitchen emerged in the pale ghostlight. A kitchen sink, identical to the real one—but with buckets, tubs, and pails of water stacked all about.

The same electric stove—but a quaint old brick fireplace in the west wall that looked like it was being used. Ted turned the flashlight off and studied the wall, and, yes, now that he knew where to look, he could see the outlines of the fireplace. It had been bricked up a long time ago. Maybe Sharon would want it restored: distressed brick, andirons, maybe a copper kettle on a decorative hook—it would be just too cute for words.

When he turned the light on again the table in the center of the kitchen had been shoved aside and a tarpaulin laid over the tiles near the floor drain. Two lumps about a meter long lay under the tarp. As he stared, an unaccountable dread stole over him, causing his hand to tremble and his throat to go dry. He extinguished the light and did not turn it on until he had left the kitchen.

The back stairway would have been a dark climb even if there had been lights. Ted guided himself as best he could, considering that what he saw by ghostlight was not necessarily what actually lay under his feet. Hey, he was in the dark; the flashlight didn't change that.

At the top of the stairs, he came face to face with the woman, clad in the boots and trousers in which he had first seen her. She stood by the window gripping a crossbow. Ted stopped in his tracks.

Oh, that face would stop any man in his tracks! It wasn't the glamour we sometimes mistake for beauty. This was no finely chiseled, dainty elegance; no hothouse flower. This was a rounded face with a wide mouth and full, soft lips; with cheeks that looked as if they had pinked in laughter more than once, with a nose that was short and wide and turned up a little at the tip. Her eyebrows were heavy and unplucked, and a dark smudge highlighted her cheek.

But it was her eyes that drew him in. They were hard and black, like coals; set deep, so that, if the light were angled right, they became dark pools. Seen full on, they brimmed with sorrow and resolution. There were no tears, but there once had been.

Still as a falcon, she hovered beside the open window, watching, waiting, sad determination on her face, her eyes fixed with infinite patience on a spot in the outside world, where Ted's light failed to penetrate. Ted could not have moved had he wanted to. He was rooted to the spot, as still as she was, unaware of the passage of time.

How long did they wait together? Do you measure time in the swings of Foucault's pendulum? Or do you measure it in heartbeats? It's the heart-time that matters. That was the clock the woman ran on; that was the tempo Ted felt.

Abruptly, smoothly, the crossbow rose to her cheek and, a heartbeat later, the bolt had sped on its way. The woman watched, smiled, and ducked back from the view of the open window.

People, I would not want to be on the receiving end of that smile! The arrow would be bad enough, but that grin was deadly. It was the falcon's

smile; or perhaps that of a mouse that has just brought down a falcon. There is a difference. The raptor's smile is almost friendly; but the curl of a mouse's lips can freeze the blood.

The woman turned and walked right through Ted. Startled, Ted took a step back—which was a mistake because, as you might remember, he was standing at the head of the stairs. He stumbled, slipped, grabbed hold of the rail, and the flashlight tumbled down the stairs. Halfway down, the ghostlight winked out.

That stairwell was dark! High noon and midnight were all the same. Cautiously, Ted went to hands and knees and backed down the stairs one step at a time, rubbing his hands across the runners as he searched. His heart raced. What if it were broken? How could he ever solve the puzzle if he had no more pieces?

His groping hands finally discovered the light in a corner of the landing, where the stairwell doglegged to the kitchen. He snatched it up, fondled the switch, and sank with relief against the wall when he saw the landing bathed in a familiar circle of pale light.

Shortly, two children scampered up the stairs, stuffed with silent laughter, making shushing motions to each other—as if three-year-olds were capable of stealth! They were both dark-featured, like the woman, and dressed nearly alike, one in skirt, one in knee pants. They passed from sight, but Ted just sat there, too drained to follow.

The woman followed softly in the children's wake.

People, let's stop calling her "the woman." She had a name. She *deserves* a name. Maybe it was Guinevere or maybe it was Janey Sue. We'll never know. Call her Sweet Betsy from Pike, who did what she had to do when she had it to do. Betsy wasn't her name; but it will serve.

She was smiling—again or still or already. Who could say, when time was all jackstraws? But it was an indulgent smile, without the knife-edge sheen of the crossbowyer. This smile glittered like the sun off a gentle pond. She wore another of those peculiar, ornately bordered, ankle-length dresses, and her face and hands this time bore no dark smudges.

Ted turned the light off and sat alone in the dark. Too many jumbled images, no sense to them. He needed time to sort them out.

This's what scientists do in their spare time: they try to sort things out. Ted lay awake in the canopied bed that second night, gnawing over what he had seen, trying to explain it. He was no linear thinker, but, looking back, you could lay his reasoning out in the semblance of logic. *Primus*: You can't see a damn thing without photons. *Secundus*: He had seen the damndest things with the ghostlight. *Ergo*: there was some peculiar form of photon—a paraphoton. (Hey, don't blame *me*. Ted made *that* one up!) These paraphotons leaked over somehow from the universe next door; and the flashlight somehow excited them to visibility.

How did they leak over? How did the light excite them? Details, people. Details. They shouldn't spoil the grandeur of the theory.

Don't complain. It was Ted's theory. Though he only called it a "working hypothesis," which is the science version of whistling in the dark. Maybe it was right, maybe it was wrong—but it did explain everything he'd seen.

Don't be silly. It explained nothing! What had Sweet Betsy shot with so much wicked satisfaction? What were those two lumps under the tarpaulin? Why board up your windows and paint them black? And why had she been crying? Hey, there was a lot more needing explanation than any damn photons could account for!

Maybe Ted knew that. Maybe that was why he awoke in the middle of the night, and, hesitating only a moment, played the ghostlight around the bedroom. Call it intuition; call it dumb luck. Call it leakage from the world abutting—but there she was, lying in bed beside him, with her tears streaming down her face, staining the pillows. Once before, he had seen her weeping and had, in consideration, turned off the intrusive light. This time, he lingered, though the moment was more private still.

Sweet Betsy was as naked as God's Truth. People, if her face was arresting, her body was hard time pounding rocks! Ted could no more have turned that light off than he could have stopped breathing—though things might have ended happier if he had.

Her body was a heaving sea—lines curving and flowing with the grace of the ocean's swells. Her breasts crested like billows; her belly was the flat calm of a tropic lagoon. Her hands were mariners, mounting the waves, sliding toward shore, backing away in the undertow before shipwrecking in the secret, seaweed-matted cove between the cliffs of her legs. A storm was building—the rain poured from her eyes, the winds rushed from her mouth. Who knew what name the breezes of her lips whispered? The gusts came faster; the waves mounted higher. Muscles tensed, back arched, hips rolled, legs clamped tight. Her mouth opened in a cry that might have been rage or ecstasy, or both.

Ted had never been unfaithful to Sharon. He had never even seriously considered it. But if Ted did hard time and pounded his rocks, you'll understand, whether you approve or not. It wasn't being unfaithful. After all, Betsy was only a phantom, a paraphoton fantasy. What Ted did in the bed beside her was not betrayal.

But he didn't turn the light off for a long time after—and that was.

The next day, Ted had the presence of mind to get the utilities connected and the Goodwill truck booked, and had the grace to feel a twinge of shame. The woman had been in grief, and he had used her like a cen-

terfold. For his penance, he threw himself once more into prepping the house. When the phones became active, he even called Sharon long distance and told her he loved her and missed her. But as the day moved toward dusk, his thoughts dwelt more and more on the phantom woman.

Finally, he told himself that he had worked enough for one day, and climbed the stairs to the master bedroom. Hey, he wasn't too tired to climb those stairs! He sat in the chair to one side of the bed, flipping the ghostlight on and off. He was hunting.

Most of the time, the sepia light revealed nothing. A room empty and abandoned, sometimes cobwebbed. One time, a pile of ruined clothing on the floor. Another, and the woman was playing with the two children. Still another, and a man leaned with his fists on the dresser, shoulders hunched, head bowed. An average kind of guy: a little paunchy, a little soft around the edges. He wasn't Joe Sixpack; but he wasn't Adonis, either.

Another glimpse of an empty room. Then, a child groping under the bed, withdrawing a ball, running from the room. Then, the man again, peeking sidewise through the window shade with a pistol in his hand.

The woman again. Standing in the center of the room, unbuttoning a long, pale dress with dark borders. The dress buttoned up the front, Ted noted—large, practical buttons hidden under those peculiar flaps. The cuffs and the neckline were tattered; the edging hung loose from the hem in two places. She undressed with stiff, deliberate motions, nearly yanking the buttons off. Her face was set in grim, straight lines. Ted settled back. The hunter had found his quarry.

At some point, the material must have torn. The stitching came loose or a button or something. It was an old dress. What do you expect? She looked for a moment at the rent; then, as if that had been a trigger, she gave the fabric a vicious tug and ripped it across. "Rending her garments"—that was the old Bible phrase, wasn't it? She tore the rest of that dress off, sleeve to dart to pleat, and threw the scraps to the floor.

She didn't peel down to the buff, just to socks and underwear; but that was enough for Ted. If nothing else convinced him that he was seeing a world that never was or would be, that underwear did the trick. Plain, serviceable, but unlike any he had ever seen. Baggy shorts with a loin-cloth panel that passed between the legs and tied in the back. A brassiere that consisted of twin slings and a bib that hung over the top and fastened with bows. The overall effect was odd—half Victorian, half Victoria's Secret.

She crossed the room, looking more ghost-like than ever. Lovely, vulnerable, and inaccessible; suffering some nameless hurt—was anything better suited to elicit his sympathy or longing? Ted followed. He even reached a hand out to her shoulder. I don't know what he expected. The walls of two universes rippled between them. His touch was insubstantial, not even a breath of air.

Hey, who's the ghost here? Betsy or Ted?

But as his hand reached the lustrous curve of her shoulder, she turned sharply—lips parted, eyes wide—and pulled a knife.

People, that was a knife! I'm not talking your apple-peeling, fingernail-paring, prissy kind of knife. I'm talking an ugly serrated edge and hooked prong. A knife like that would rip a wound that would never close. It made you bleed just to *look* at it!

Ted certainly thought so, because he danced away as pretty as you please. He *knew* it couldn't touch him; he knew she couldn't see him. But why take chances? Only males think women enjoy being watched by men, and she held that knife like she knew how to use it.

The woman ran on cat's feet into the darkness beyond the flashlight's range. When Ted found her again, she was crouched by the bedroom door, peering down the hallway, shielding the knife blade from the light.

Wait a minute! Let's back up here! Sweet Betsy was stripped to her skivvies, and that underwear didn't do a very good job at hiding *her*, let alone an arsenal. Where had that shiv been lurking? That's a puzzling question, all right; but, people, can't we leave her *some* secrets?

Ted waited, helplessly aware of the rasping of his own breath, until, slowly, the woman relaxed and backed away from the doorway. No. She backed away; she never relaxed, though the knife did disappear. At the dresser once more, she pulled out a heavy, denim-like shirt and trousers.

Ted resumed his hunt. Hey, he knew what he was looking for, and you have to admire his persistence, if not his goal. He flicked that light until he found another tableau more to his liking: The man and the woman were coupling on the bed. Ted moved the chair a little to the side and settled in, cradling the flashlight in his left hand.

Hey, don't be too hard on old Ted. You weren't there, and his motives don't matter any more. The whole situation was surreal; the woman, no more substantial than a photograph. How was it different from reading a skin mag or watching a triple-X flick? Ted wasn't where he needed to be yet; but in his mind she had graduated from "phenomenón" to "sex object." That was progress, sort of.

It was a slow, wary congress that he watched. Both were fully clothed, but had unfastened the panels in their clothing. Sweet Betsy's long, embroidered dress was gathered up to her waist, exposing the sweet curve of her hips and thighs. He lay atop her, rising and falling while she rocked her hips against him. Her legs danced, caressed him with her heels. Her mouth was parted and, when the man was not exploring it with his own, moved as if she were speaking or crying out. There were no sounds, though; so Ted had to supply the panting and sighing on his own.

He did a good job, too. He was done before they were.

Well, the action was pretty erotic, all right—if you overlooked the pistols each held in their right hands. They never let go and they never

closed their eyes. If Ted had been less focused on the matter in hand, he might have noticed, and pondered, that little point.

Look, this wasn't like peeking into someone's bedroom. It was *his* bedroom, and the woman was not real. She was someone who never was, or only might have been. But Ted felt badly enough that he turned the flashlight off and did not turn it on again until he had left the room to make his way downstairs to the kitchen. He had confidence now that the house was structurally identical in the ghostlight, though he was still wary when it came to the placement of furniture.

In the kitchen, he found the man and woman again. She wore a dark dress; he wore rough work clothes. He might have been going out to work on the garden, if it weren't for the crossed bandoliers and the bolt-action rifle slung on his shoulder. Their arms enwrapped each other and they kissed like there was no tomorrow. Then—perhaps there was a knock at the kitchen door—the woman let three more men into the house.

You know those men. The mailman; the grocer; the truck driver down the corner. Ordinary joes. They were all dressed up for a hunting trip. Billed caps pulled down low; cartridges stuffed in pockets, bandoliers, pistol belts. A shotgun. A longbow. One of those funny-looking crossbows he had seen the woman use. They all looked nervous and scared, but determined. Hey, if this was a hunting trip, Bambi must be shooting back!

Handgrips all around, and the party left swiftly, slipping out the door. The man—her husband?—was last. He and the woman touched each other briefly on the cheek; then she was alone. She threw home the big bolt on the kitchen door and, turning, placed her back to the door. After a moment, she strode away, brushing at her eye with the back of her hand. The gesture left a smudge on her cheek.

Ted wondered how she expected the man to get back inside with that big, honking bolt on the door.

Ted made his way to the front of the house, where he scanned the parlor with his ghostlight. A piano stood near the window. Maybe it was a harpsichord. This view was dimmer than the others. The woman, a half-seen wraith, clad in a lightweight two-piece dress of summery fabric, sat at the keyboard. The two children sang. (Well, their mouths were open. Call it what you want.) In a chair on the other side of the room, the man watched with a contented smile while he read a newspaper. A happier scene; an older one, perhaps—which might account for its dimness. The man spoke. The woman looked up from the keyboard, and he pointed to something in the paper. But the woman frowned and shook her head, nodding toward the children.

Ted winced, toggled the light—and now the parlor was deserted and the windows boarded up. Of the harpsichord and the singing children,

there was no sign. Whatever music had filled this room was long faded. Suddenly, Ted bolted for the front door. Maybe he felt the walls closing in on him. Maybe those glimpses were stuffing him up like a Christmas goose and he needed to get away so he could think.

Outside, night had fallen badly. It always did in that part of town. It lay here and there in scattered pools, in the corners of houses; behind bushes, in the black slashes that were the shadows of light poles. Shattered and broken by triumphant streetlamps and houselights. To the right, behind the tract houses, a dome of light marked downtown. To the left, two blocks away but hidden by the trees, the strip mall created a wall of iridescent neon. There are places in the world where night never truly falls, outside the heart.

What chance did the ghostlight have? When Ted played it about the porch, when he aimed it at the old mansions on either side of Pennyworth House, when he tried for the tract houses on the far side of the road, the best he could elicit was the faint hint of a double image.

Bushes lined the porch. Ted went to the rail and leaned on it, watching the leaves rustle in the wind, listening to the voices of the breeze. Maybe he was thinking of the woman, naked and weeping beside him in the bed. Her breasts, soft and erect; her legs spread in welcome; her lips hungry and parted; her fingers playing the lover. Or maybe he was thinking only of his own inability to touch her, to console her. Perhaps he gave her a name, then. Who can say? It was probably not our name, not Sweet Betsy; but any name will do. Names make us human.

She was a ghost, and she haunted the house like a forgotten dream. There might be a plausible scientific rationale. Given parallel universes, you can explain anything. But she was a ghost. That was the nub of it.

And yet, she wasn't *just* a ghost. Somehow, Ted's curiosity had shifted gears. It no longer focused on paraphotons, but on what had happened or would happen or might happen to Sweet Betsy. What tragedy was playing out in those brief, disconnected glimpses? Hey, if a little bit of cross-dimensional pud-knocking is what it takes to make a connection, who are we to frown disapproval? Betsy had been a phantom; now she was a person.

He stood there for a long time, listening to the whispering bushes. What they told him, only Ted knows.

In the end, and almost as an afterthought, he aimed the ghostlight onto the dark recess between the shivering bushes and the porch. Dirt, twigs, leaves, the detritus of a dozen years of weather and wind. Flowers, blooming and trampled. Footprints with drag marks between them. Odd prints, as if someone barefoot walked tippy-toe. The tracks led toward the right, and he followed them around the last bush, out of the blackness into the paler shadow of the great hickory in the front yard. The bush

shook—but was it a breeze? Ted walked to the corner of the porch to get a better angle.

Someone crouched there. A woman? The long, flowing hair said so. The flare of the hips cried it out. But the hair was matted and tangled and full of burrs; and the grimy skin was a tattoo of scars and scratches and cicatrices. She crouched over something small and still. Ted's hand trembled. Was this Sweet Betsy in some final, degraded, feral moment? Somehow he couldn't believe that. He aimed the light straight at the crouching figure.

The woman turned and shielded her eyes with both arms. Oh, yes, it was a woman, all right—or at least, a female. The breasts were small and tight, but there was no mistaking the mat of fur at her groin. Ted lowered the flashlight a fraction of an inch, and the woman dropped her arms and snarled. Her eyes glowed like charcoal in the penumbra of the light. Incongruously, she seemed to have long, painted nails. As well expect lipstick as nail care on such a creature! Ted stood dumbfounded for a fraction of a second *and the creature leaped!*

As it leaped, it seemed to move forward from its background, as if the universe had zoom control. Its arms arced and its nails raked the air. Ted turned that light off damn fast, I tell you! And he left it off the rest of the night. When he lay in bed, later, his eyes refused to close. Well, he'd been scared enough to wet his pants, and when was the last time that ever happened to *you*? The very fabric of space had bulged; and there might even be a claw mark or two on the walls of the universe.

What sort of talk is this? What sort of flimsy, gimcrack universe is it, if you can push its walls and stretch them and scratch them up? And what was that *thing*? Ted had only seen it for an instant, but it was a real Kodak moment, and he lay awake a long time trying to forget.

It had walked on the balls of feet grown so long that the heel had become a sort of second, backward-facing knee. Think of the leap you'd get from that compound leverage! (Think about it? You *saw* it. Why, you could spring from one universe to the next, if such a thing were possible.) A narrow torso, hairless except for the underarms and groin and a little shag on the lower legs. A browless head wreathed by a lion's mane of hair. Those nails were claws, and it wasn't nail polish that made them so dark, and it wasn't lipstick around its mouth and dripping down its long canine teeth.

People, that creature was inhuman, but you could see the human in it. It was what humans might have been had the lion niche been empty. Or maybe it was what humans might yet *become*: a genetic experiment gone horribly wrong; or (even more horribly) *right*.

Call it *Homo leonis*. Call it a leaper. Call it any damn thing you please. Ted pondered how small children liked to play hide-and-seek. But some

places you shouldn't hide in, because something else may have hidden there first. Ted shivered through the night, though it was unseasonably warm for April.

The Goodwill truck came the next day, and Ted lost himself in the petty details of the loading. He took the three workers through the house, pointing out what he had flagged for them to take. Two burly men in sleeveless shirts, wearing back-support belts; one woman, short and chunky, who looked as if sheer determination could make up for lack of size. Maybe Ted took comfort from their presence. Strong, competent, full of good cheer, they carted everything down the front porch, over to the driveway, where they secured it in the van. (Though the woman placed the gasogene in the cab under the shotgun seat. Hey, why throw away a perfectly good gasogene?)

When they were done, they went through the ritual of receipt-giving and bill-of-lading-signing and shook hands, and Ted very nearly let them take the ghostlight with them. Good riddance! He watched them go, but, at the last moment, ran after them and fetched it back. He returned to the house with the instrument cradled in his arm like a newborn. He might not be sure if he ever wanted to turn it on again, but he was keeping his options open.

People, the worst thing is not knowing. Terror festers in the gap between intimation and confirmation, feeds on uncertainty, grows on fancies. There might be a lady behind that door or a tiger—but either way, it's got to be a relief when it's finally opened.

Ted carried that light around with him the rest of the day as he readied the house for the moving van's arrival. He carried it with him most of the evening as he prepared a quick, cold meal for himself. He carried it with him to bed. Half a dozen times, he ran his thumb over the switch without pressing it; but, people, he could no more *not* turn that light on again than he could hold his breath forever.

One flick: a deserted bedroom. A second flick: a fully furnished room with a carpet on the floor that he had never noticed before. One more try, then stop. No point pushing your luck, right? No telling what might jump out at you.

No telling. The third try showed Sweet Betsy once more lying in bed beside him, swathed in bedclothes that were half pajamas, half duffel bag. She stared into the bed's canopy with a worried frown. It was not the inconsolable sorrow that he had seen before, nor was it the icy satisfaction of the crossbower, and still more, it was not the pure delight that had tracked the two children up the kitchen stairwell. Perhaps the worm was only beginning to gnaw at her bosom then; perhaps joy was not yet something that could only be remembered.

A hand reached out and stroked her, running down her side and across her stomach, and the woman turned toward Ted. With a sudden shock, he realized that the husband must be lying just where Ted was. Ted fixed the flashlight into a space in the carved headboard so that it spotlighted the bed. His own body was transparent to the ghostlight; so he was not even a shadow on that other world. Insubstantial, he became a ghost himself, and contented himself with conforming to the motions he observed.

The man worked gently and kindly, as if the act were intended for comfort more than pleasure; yet he also worked with a certain urgency. A swift, practiced flip of the wrist, and the drawstring of the overgarment pulled loose, exposing the woman's strange lingerie of flaps and ties. Those ties were fastened with knots to delight a sailor, and—who knows?—maybe in that world knotwork had become a kind of foreplay. A simple square knot, that was easy; and the fingers that Ted imagined as his own disposed of it in a trifle. But *cat's-paws* and *hawser bends* and *blackwalls*? And the one that mattered most of all, that was *Gordian's knot* itself!

Don't you believe it! Sweet Betsy had dressed herself in slipknots and bows. Those laces untied themselves. The man's fingers were not the only ones tugging at the ends. The woman was not the only one needing comfort; nor the man the only one giving it.

It was all visual, of course. Ted could not taste the honey of her mouth, nor smell the musk of her desire. He could not hear her whispered endearments. He could not feel the warmth and softness of her skin or the smooth, enveloping moistness of her love. Anything tactile, he had to supply himself. It was a poor thing that he substituted, though in a strange and weird fashion, he had come to love her, and, barred from all other senses, he did what little he could.

If you flip back and forth through a book, opening pages at random, sooner or later you happen on the last page. Ted's light brought him glimpses of one tangential segment of congruent space-time. Depending on luck, or on infinitesimal differences in initial conditions, what he saw each time fell earlier or later along that segment. But chaos theory and differential topology, metrics and local continuity, are the last thing that matters here. Make up whatever explanation you want.

Let me tell you what was in that last chapter.

Start with the woman. Start with Sweet Betsy, fallen backward on the hallway floor, one hand gripping a discharged crossbow, her heavy canvas jacket torn by three parallel rents starting near the shoulder and running crosswise down her torso. Start with the blood seeping through in those tears and her labored breathing as she pushed herself slowly to her feet. She staggered and leaned against the wall, but, by damn, she re-

cocked that bow and set another bolt before she let her hands explore her wound! How could you not love a woman like that?

Start with the woman; but look down the hall at the body twitching near the main staircase. A fine specimen of *H. leonis*, don't you think? Sure, those leapers are lethal. Humans have always been top predator, and this particular breed has made a specialty of it. But you have to admire the grace and power, the lean, powerful lines. Thighs like pistons; claws like ten-penny nails! Even dead, it looked deadly. You had to admire, too, those eyes that chance had shaped to see another light. It may be that clawing your way between universes is no great feat. Universes are flimsy things; paper bags. It may be that you could do it *yourself*, if only you could see which way to leap.

Sweet Betsy backed into her bedroom, and Ted saw that she had moved her arsenal there. Whatever game of cat-and-mouse had been played out here—whatever victories the mice had won—it was clearly the endgame now. She was at bay and she knew it. Ted could read that in her eyes.

He couldn't bear to see her go down. So he flicked the ghostlight off—and tried for an earlier, happier scene.

Hey, what kind of shit do you think Ted was? Do you really think he would let her go down *alone*? Maybe he couldn't connect, but he could *be there*. Every one of Ted's muscles were tensed, every part of him was ready; but all he could do was stand and watch. Sweet Betsy had lost all hope—she had lost her children, her husband, her neighbors, any thought that she would come through—but *triumph still curled her lip*. Ted could not help her, and he wept in despair. Helpless is a crueler state than hopeless.

People, lions hunt in packs.

And while you're watching that one out front, the others are circling around where you can't see them. On the other side of the grasses.

Space shimmered and tore. It *bulged*, and the background grew weirdly distorted, as if viewed through a fish-eye lens. For a moment, there were two doorways; there were two dressers against two walls. Then claws like iron raked down, the bubble popped, and space-time parted like a curtain.

It must have made a sound. Hey, you can't rip the walls of the universe apart and expect to do it quietly! Sweet Betsy spun and swung her cross-bow to her shoulder, firing even as it came into line.

H. leonis is human. Sever its carotid artery with a razor-sharp arrow-head, and it pumps its life out as readily as you or I. But it's *fast*, and it's not alone.

The second hunter was through the portal, sprinting across the body of its companion. Oh, that was a leap! Straight and true, claws aching for the throat of its prey.

Straight and true? Not with that ghastly ghostlight shining into its eyes and blinding it! It missed. Betsy didn't. Hey, *H. leonis* wasn't the only hunter in the room! *H. sapiens* may have been many things, here and there—but never mice.

Betsy dropped the second crossbow. No time to reload now. She seized a rifle. Bolt-action, but it fired a cartridge that could drop a lion. The leapers were dazed, shielding their eyes against a sourceless brilliance. Ted trained the ghostlight on their faces as they squeezed through the rent in space. Their eyes, sensitive to that preternatural light, glowed like charcoal in a blast. Cock. Fire. Cock. Fire. Cock. Fire.

It was a three-bullet clip. The rifle joined the crossbows and Betsy snatched the pistol from where it lay ready on the dresser top. She spared one bullet for a leaper still moving on the floor; then fired methodically into the pack.

Those leapers might not be intelligent, but they weren't stupid. A second tear opened up. Through it, Ted glimpsed a third version of the bedroom: a shambles, smashed, decayed by rain and weather, a patchwork of light and shadow showing that portions of the roof were gone. How long had *H. leonis* been prowling about in *that* universe?

Two leapers came through, one from each hole. Ted cried out, chose one and blinded it.

And the other got her.

It was fast. Those creatures could move in a blur when they were motivated. It landed square on Sweet Betsy and bore her down—claws and fangs, one-two-three—then everything was still.

Several more hunters squeezed into the room. They pranced around the prone body in small impatient leaps. Their mouths opened and closed in mewls that Ted could not hear. What were they waiting for? For the one that made the kill to share it? Were there pack-hunter rules? Carnivore Miss Manners? Finally, one grew impatient, reached forward and nudged the victor with its foot.

And the victor rolled off Sweet Betsy with a great, honking knife in its heart.

People, Ted laughed! He wanted to dance, to savor her last victory. But he turned the ghostlight off once and for all. Nothing he could do now could help Sweet Betsy, and he absolutely could not abide watching the feast.

Besides, the leapers had started to squint in his direction.

Sure, if he tried the light again, he would probably see Betsy, alive and well, in some earlier time. Maybe playing with her children. Maybe making love to her man. Maybe, if he somehow aimed the light far down the corridor of time, a dim glimpse of a world to which the leapers had not yet found their way. But he didn't. He couldn't. He took the ghostlight downstairs, to the cellar stairs, and hung it on the hook where he'd first found it. Then he closed the door and locked it and walked away forever.

* * *

Sharon refused to move into the house, of course. The realtor and the owner's estate argued that it was a done deal and she had no choice. They were sorry, but a contract was a contract. The media saw things differently and drummed the story for all it was worth; and, people, it was worth plenty! Even the police officers went on television and said as how they would never move into a house where their spouse had been brutally murdered; especially not if they had found the body themselves! Sharon was in treatment, trying to work through her grief, and the seller's obstinacy was only making things worse for her and for her son. In the end, the estate caved and ate the contract. They never did sell the place.

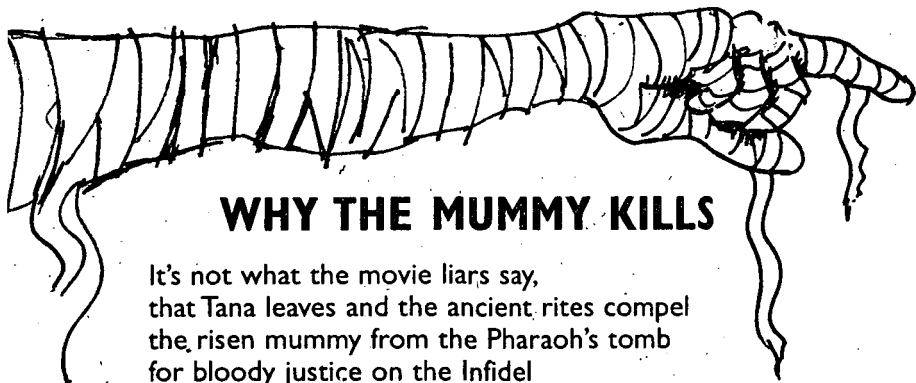
Stories about the murder circulated for a long time after. It was in the tabloids, and people chattered nervously in checkout lanes and around gas pumps. The self-righteous prattled—about moral decay or social injustice, depending. There was a brisk sale of locks and security systems, and a vigilante gang beat up some folks who, if not precisely innocent, had nothing to do with what had happened to Ted. Some said it was a drug gang that had been using the empty house as a crack den. Some said it was bikers on a sado-maso kick. Others said it was Satanists; because there were these rumors that the body had been mutilated *and partly eaten*. What Sharon saw when she walked into the house, she never told. So no one really knows what went down.

Oh, *Ted* knew. People, he knew when he turned that light into those feral faces that it could end the way it did. So, when you turn a glass over for Betsy, or whatever her real name was, turn another one over for Ted, or whatever *his* real name was, because *he didn't have to lift a damn finger*.

Sometimes, when the light is right, or the angle, you can see the shades of other worlds. It may be only some trick of the light, a peculiar form of polarization. It may be the quantum resonance of worldlines abutting. Perhaps paraphotons leak over from the world next door.

It is not clear what these glimpses mean, or why we sometimes see them. In the end, we each sit in the center of our own universe and watch others dimly through the screening walls. Are those walls real, or are they only built of our own blindness? If we reach out far enough, we could touch, if only briefly. Ted did. He found a way.

Too bad that, in finding it, he showed the leapers the direction to the next universe. They're in *your* world now, a few of them—and more will follow. You won't like it. ●



WHY THE MUMMY KILLS

It's not what the movie liars say,
that Tana leaves and the ancient rites compel
the risen mummy from the Pharaoh's tomb
for bloody justice on the Infidel

because they did not pay enough respect
to megalomaniac kings who killed
ten thousand slaves to build a monument
to ego and the homage it demands,

as if some petty empire bondage-built
should after thirty centuries still command
respect which, but for fear, it never had
from those who died to raise the bloody stones.

No mummy murdered by those selfsame kings
because their vanity, ruthless as the sun,
required a guardian to pass undisturbed
through all the future centuries of Man,

could think he owed allegiance still
to those who killed but would not let him die.
It's not the Pharaoh's vengeance brings that strangled cry
or drives that halting stagger through the night,

it's rage that fuels that agonized pursuit
and snaps the necks of those whose greed
for gold or knowledge opened up that tomb
and made him live
when all he loves is dead.

—William John Watkins



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R. Garcia y Robertson

Fair Verona

The fast-paced and inventive "Fair Verona" is up to R. Garcia y Robertson's usual high standards. Mr. Garcia's latest books include *The Virgin and the Dinosaur* (1996) and its sequel *Atlantis Found* (spring 1997). Both novels were published by AvoNova, and both are partly based on stories published in Asimov's. The author's next book, a collection of short fictions entitled *The Moon Maid and Other Fantastic Stories*, will be out soon from Golden Gryphon Press. The book will provide a

hard-cover home for a number of tales that first appeared in our pages.



Illustration by Darryl Elliott

LICENSED TO ONE USER
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"In fair Verona, where we lay our scene . . ."

—Romeo and Juliet, Prologue

The Noble Dog

Antonio first saw her in the night, at Carnival on the Via Cappello. He had just staggered out of the inn that came to be called the Casa di Giulietta, because of its marble balcony. A surge of revelers filled the torchlit street. Harlequins, lace doves, street minstrels, and drunken louts—laughing, dancing, singing, and colliding, tripping over cobbles, falling into fountains, and pissing on the bonfires.

Standing under "Romeo's" balcony, with enough good red bardolino aboard to float a boat, Antonio wondered what mischief he meant to get into. Should it be a woman, or a fight? Or maybe both. Then he saw her. His heavenly vision. Lady Love in a gold lace mask and a wide-sleeved gown. She turned, winked, blew a kiss, then was gone, whirled away by the throng.

Without taking fuddled eyes off the crowd, he grabbed Proteus, his manservant, who was busy tipping the innkeeper. "Did you see her? Who was she?"

Proteus pushed a silver groat on the barkeep, then turned to his drunken master. "Who was who?"

"The woman in the gold mask. She was shockingly beautiful."

Proteus looked askance at the crowd. No woman seemed to stand out. "How could you tell? She was masked."

"I can tell," Antonio insisted. He had seen it in the smile above her swan white throat. "You can tell a beautiful woman by her walk. By the way she carries her head."

"Doubtless." Proteus slipped a spare bottle of bardolino into his jacket. The way tonight was headed, his master would be brought to bed soused. Or not at all.

"She has to be the most beautiful lady at Carnival. I'd stake my life on it. My fortune. My estates. Even my slim hope of seeing salvation."

"I have nothing to match against that," Proteus admitted.

That she was a lady was obvious. Her gown, her gold-linked belt, her wig powdered with gold dust—were all beyond the means of Verona's most industrious courtesans. Plunging cloth-of-gold décolletage had shown off sculpted neck and shoulders, and round firm breasts, right down to the nipples. But Antonio would have been wild for her if she had worn sackcloth. Or a nun's habit.

Pushing Proteus aside, he lurched into the street. The crowd parted smartly for him. Despite his black-feathered mask, none could mistake the prince's nephew in tight hose and pearl-studded jacket, sword at his side and spurred like a Tartar.

He looked up toward the Piazza Erbe, the herb market atop the ancient forum. Nothing. Turning toward the Via Stella, he spotted a flash of gold in the throng. Antonio took off, spurs striking sparks on the pavement.

The crowd parted even more promptly. Antonio Cansignorio della Scala was so used to such deference, he barely noticed. Everything in Verona seemed arranged for his pleasure. He was the Noble Dog. Tall and handsome, an accomplished troubadour, a skilled condottiere, a passable silversmith, and a good Catholic—but an enemy of the Pope. Most of all, he had the good luck to be a nephew to Cangrande della Scala, the “Big Dog” who lorded over Verona. Directly descended from Mastino I, the Mastiff, founder of the Scaligeri dynasty.

The woman in gold turned a corner, headed for the Piazza Bra. Antonio dashed down a side street, cutting her off. But when he got to the Piazza, he could not pick her out of the costumed crowd. Had he lost her? He doubled back up an alley. There was only one other way she could have gone. Ahead loomed the Arena, Verona's ancient Roman amphitheater. Second only to the Colosseum in size, its colonnade blocked off the entire eastern side of the Piazza Bra. He had her trapped. Unless she hid in the Arena itself, hardly the place for a woman alone on Carnival Night.

Then he spotted her. Beyond the mouth of the alley, framed in one of the Arena's dark cavernous archways, a gold icon in a black niche. He called to her to stop. She turned to look back, standing still and composed. Waiting. She had the good sense to know when the game had gone far enough.

Two costumed men stepped out of the gloom at the head of the alley, coming between her and him. One wore a jester's belled cap and floppy straw boots. The other was tall, wearing the black cloak and white bird-faced mask of a plague doctor. Both had swords at their sides.

The Jester called out, “Montague or Capulet?” The worst words any honest Veronan could hear in a dark alley.

“Neither, swine!” Antonio swore, drawing sword and dagger, not for an instant thinking that this was some honest mistake. Masked or not, all men knew the prince's nephew. Nor would it be the first time that a street feud was used to cover murder. “A thousand pardons, we thought the man was a Montague.”

And Antonio had enemies aplenty. Mighty enemies. A godawful long list. Headed by Pope Clement V, Christ's Vicar on Earth, and lapdog of Philip the Fair. Guelfs in general hated him. So did the Visconti vipers of Milan. Then there were the French, a blasphemous nation of traitors and ingrates. Whole hosts of people would be happy to hear that the Noble Dog had died in some dark alley. Some would even take the trouble to arrange it.

But it was easier wished than done. He glanced past the two men to

the woman. She took no active part, standing motionless, lips parted in horror—or perhaps excitement; her mask made it impossible to tell.

"Drop your sword," the Jester shouted. "We only mean to talk."

"Just a word," the Plague Doctor assured him.

"My word is 'Begone,'" Antonio retorted. "Draw if you be men!"

The Jester drew blade, saying over his shoulder, "Back me."

Antonio sprang to meet him. Swords clashed and grated. Bells rang on the Jester's cap as he backpedaled, parrying briskly. Fighting drunk, and full of anger, Antonio easily forced them back. Too easily. Both men swiftly gave ground. Suddenly the Jester slipped in his floppy boots, going down on one knee with a shriek of fear.

Piss-poor acting. Instead of trying to get in past the man's guard, Antonio spun about, putting his back to a wall.

A third assassin, dressed like a Saracen in a cloak and turban, leaped from a doorway. His scimitar sliced empty air, where the Noble Dog had been.

The trap had been obvious even to the half-drunk Antonio. Two men falling back before one, while the ringing bells on the Jester's cap covered the third attacker's footsteps. Antonio had seen it done before. And better.

He slashed at the Saracen's throat, feeling the solid jar of contact down the length of his sword arm. Sure of his kill, the Saracen never had time to parry. Blood sprayed the width of the alley. The assassin crumpled, his head hanging sideways.

Antonio congratulated himself. Not bad for fighting on a head full of bardolino! It was two to one again.

The Jester scrambled back to his feet, cursing. He called to the Doctor, "Come, man, make worm's meat out of him!"

The Jester met Antonio's drunken attack, while the black-cloaked Plague Doctor tried to get at the Noble Dog's left side. Cool professionals, they acted unfazed by the death of their comrade. But the narrowness of the alley fought for Antonio, keeping them from both getting to him at once.

Abandoning his caution, the Jester pressed Antonio hard, trying to create an opening for the Doctor. Swords met, rasped, struck sparks. Antonio parried with his dagger, thrusting past the Jester's guard. His point pierced the Jester's jacket, which was sewn with playing cards. Striking metal, the Noble Dog's blade bounced back. There was steel hidden beneath the card-sewn jacket. The Jester's boldness was explained—his ringing Fool's Cap hid the clang of armor.

Grinning, the Jester came on, bolder than ever, hacking and slashing. He did not fear a body blow, and probably had an armored codpiece to boot.

Antonio fainted low, as though going for the groin. The Jester rose on

his toes, aiming a downward slash. Antonio again parried high with the dagger—this time aiming his sword thrust beneath the upraised arm. His grandfather had been on the losing side at Benevento, and never tired of telling how King Manfred's German mercenaries were cut down by French knights striking *à l'estoc*, into the armpit. His point slid through the Jester's sleeve, and over the cuirass.

The Belled Fool folded up, staggered, and fell gasping against the Doctor. He had the impudence to take Antonio's blade with him, its point tangled in the puffed sleeve and the top of his lung.

Letting go of the sword, Antonio sprang forward with just his dagger, staking everything on a single drunken rush. Pushing the dying Jester aside, the bird-faced Doctor aimed a sweeping blow at Antonio. Too late. The Noble Dog got inside his guard, grabbing the Doctor's right wrist, slamming him against the alley wall. His dagger at the man's throat, he hissed, "Yield."

Helpless, the Doctor let his blade fall. His white bird mask looked blankly at the Noble Dog.

Antonio glanced up to see the woman disappear into the Arena archway. Damn. Missed her again. The man beneath him would die for that. But first . . .

Keeping the dagger clenched in his hand, he grabbed the beak of the white bird-mask, wrenching it back. Finding the face beneath irritatingly familiar. He *knew* this man from somewhere. "Why?" Antonio demanded. "Why dare to accost me?"

Amazingly calm, despite sure death at his throat, the man managed a devil-may-care smirk. "There is a call on your service. Clients are coming down the Beanstalk."

Heartbreak Hotel

Tearing off his headset, Toni stared at the 3V deck resting on his knees. Naked thighs shone slick and white in the artificial light. Disoriented and drenched in sweat, it took time for the truth to sink in. Those were *his* thighs. He was no longer in Verona. No longer the Noble Dog. No longer wearing pants.

An audio beeper indicated incoming messages. Toni ignored it, still fixed on Verona. Who was she? Had she really gone into the Arena?

Beeps increased in volume, dragging him into the here-and-now, badgering him with incoming calls. He hated that. Hated being jerked out of the program. Hell, he hated being out of the program *period*. Hated being anywhere but Verona.

Shutting down the beeper, he stared at the stained white ceiling of the sanitary unit. Sitting bareassed in a dingy portable toilet, fed by a glu-

cose drip, was a piss-poor substitute for being a prince's nephew at Carnival time. Or at any time.

Setting aside the 3V deck, he climbed up on his exercise bike, thankful that Ariel's pull was only .5g. Any more, and he never would have made it off the toilet seat. Toni found physical exercise boring—but most real-time activities were essentially tedious. So Toni put his tedium to maximum use, telling Proteus—Programmed Techno-Environmental Utilization Service—"Give me the priority messages."

The housekeeping program obeyed. Grunting atop the bike, Toni responded to his calls as best he could.

"Check. Hunting party headed down the Beanstalk."

"Yes. Of course I still think of you."

"Fuck off."

"2100 tomorrow—at the soonest."

"Will call back."

"Shit. OK, OK, I'll get to it."

When he could not take any more, he told Proteus, "Dump everything over forty hours old. Hold the rest."

Toni got down off the bike, inserted the glucose drip, and set the deck on his lap, tempted to return at once to Verona. He had to follow her into the Arena. And . . .

His hand hovered above the deck, fingers itching to hit VERONA. He hit DRAGON HUNT instead.

Instantly, Toni was outside—standing at the base of the Beanstalk, looking out over Freeport with infrared eyes. Geodomes and apartment blocks glowed softly from internal heat. Powered filters showed as bright firefly streaks. Pair-a-Dice Beanstalk towered above him, piercing the dawn sky, connecting Freeport to the Pair-a-Dice geosync platform thousands of clicks overhead. The topless stalk cast a thin shadow onto the cloud plain, a dark razor-straight line disappearing in the direction of Nightside.

It was early morning. Prospero had just cut a notch in the cloud plain surrounding Mt. Beanstalk. Another long drawn-out day had begun. This far into the Twilight Belt, it was always dawn or dusk. Ariel kept the same face turned toward her primary, Prospero. Orbital libration produced a slow-mode version of day and night; long cool mornings alternating with shady twilights. Prospero never climbed too high in the sky, nor sank too low below the horizon.

A Transgalactic Liner was in on Pair-a-Dice. Tourists jammed the sidewalk, wearing tinsel wigs and chrome yellow pompoms—laughing, joking, and generally embarrassing themselves. Toni was not in the mood to be amused by rich fools with nothing to do. And he could have done something about it. At the moment he was three meters tall, stand-

ing head and shoulders above the crowd on duraluminum legs. His metal arms—all four of them—could have scythed through the throng, braining the lot of them without so much as raising a sweat. Plasti-metal does not perspire.

But he had better things to do. Better as in *paid*. Otherwise, he would have deleted Freeport completely, and gone straight to Verona. He flipped off the infrared filters. The last time he had inhabited the cyborg body had been for a Nightside hunt. Here, he did not need them.

Ali, Harpo, and Doc came striding up. They too were three meters tall, with plasti-metal bodies. Except for Ali, who was a head shorter, nonchalantly carrying his cyborg cranium tucked under his arm. The helmeted head, with its radar dome, sonar receptors, and binocular lenses, looked up at Toni. "Draw if you be men," the head dared him. Its speak-box exactly mimicked the Noble Dog's accent.

Toni glared at the talking head.

"Or we'll make worm's meat of you," Harpo added.

"Shut up with the Shakespeare," Toni growled. In Verona, he could have had the three of them flayed.

The cyborgs laughed. In Ali's case, the chuckle came from under his arm. He hefted the head and screwed it—still laughing—onto his shoulders. "We had to come for you."

"But not just then. I was *this* close." Toni lifted his upper left hand, holding two heavy gauntleted fingers a micron apart.

"Gives you a reason to go back." Harpo's attempt at a grin looked like the front end of a ground car. As if Toni *needed* a reason. As if any of them did. They all had their private Veronas. They enjoyed jerking him out merely because misery loves company. He would get them back.

A soft subsonic buzz warned that their Pair-a-Dice capsule had arrived. The pressure door at the base of the Beanstalk began to disgorge luggage. Hand-tooled leather flight bags. Fancy holographic camcorders. Field shelters. Night glasses and freeze-dried gourmet rations. An auto-bar and a silver tea-service. Along with sufficient ancillary equipment to start a small colony.

Port workers in mint-green candy-striped coveralls attacked the mountain of belongings, loading them onto gravity sleds, working briskly, but without enthusiasm. They wore electronic shackles and shock collars. Most were government employees—addicts, vagrants, debtors, and moral degenerates, working off their debt to society.

Then came the hunting party. First the Client, flanked by a pair of SuperChimp bodyguards, looking sure of himself and overly successful. He had a squat bald head, cropped ears, beady eyes, pink jowls, several chins, and no noticeable neck. His lace-trimmed purple doublet and parti-colored hose merely made him look more grotesque, like Quasimodo in a clown suit. Anyone who could easily afford biosculpt, but still looked

that ugly, obviously did not give a damn what an age of artificial beauty thought. People had to take him as he was, or not at all. His walk matched his looks, brusque and self-absorbed. Oblivious to underlings scurrying around him, he talked through an open comlink to someone in orbit. Toni told Proteus to put a name to the face.

Proteus obeyed—(*Alexander Gracchus*, CEO of Transgalactic for the Deneb Kaitos, offices in Mt. Zion in Mt. Zion system, on Aesir III and Vanir II in the Twin Systems, and on Pair-a-Dice in Prospero System. Personal residences: Baldar, main moon of Aesir VII, Sylvan Hall on Vanir II, and a lodge in the Quartz Peaks Hunt Preserve on Aesir III. Three wives, five children, 2s. 3d.)

The rest of the party looked tiny compared to Gracchus and his hulking bodyguards. Two of them were women. Proteus identified them as Gracchus's younger wives—Selene and Pandora. Selene, older and senior, had blonde hair and fair skin dusted with silver. She wore a feathered, flaring gown better suited to a ballet than a Wyvyrn hunt. Pandora, the junior wife, was more sensibly dressed, wearing thigh-length boots and a leopard-skin leotard. Alert and self-reliant, she had a friendly, curious face framed by untidy lacquered hair trimmed to ten-centimeter spikes. Like the stevedores, she wore an electronic slave collar—only diamond-studded.

Pandora immediately took charge of the baggage, helping to stow it aboard a big aerial barge docked by the Beanstalk. Working briskly and cheerfully in her spiked hair and leotards, she encouraged the convict labor by passing out stim tabs from a pillbox on her wrist. Toni lumbered over to lend his four mechanical hands. If he could not be in Verona, he meant to be doing *something*.

The baggage pile vanished into the barge, and Pandora (whose name meant "All-giving") emptied the contents of her pillbox, passing out extra tabs as rewards. A guard wearing a purple skin-suit with broad white vertical stripes strolled over, one hand resting on a holstered riot pistol. He signed for her to stop. Without saying a word, Pandora whipped a miniature chrome holocam off her wrist. Smiling, she handed the holocam to the guard, who pocketed it, turning his back on the proceedings.

One port worker refused the pills. An older woman with graying hair, she glared at Pandora, saying that she did not need "hoppers." Whatever crime the woman had to work off probably didn't come close to passing out drugs to convicts. Or bribing a trustee.

Pandora deftly handed her tabs to the next guy. Reaching up, she removed two sapphire chip earrings, putting them in the older woman's palm. "No one should work for nothing."

The woman gaped at the tiny blue stones, then swiftly closed her hand before the guard could see.

Pandora smiled ruefully up at Toni. What could you give a three-me-

ter-tall cyborg? "Maybe later," she said, and shrugged. Toni did not answer—totally uninterested in whatever she had to offer.

The hunting party trooped aboard the barge and lifted off into dawn light. Freeport and Pair-a-Dice Beanstalk fell behind them. The barge was big, resting on huge rounded helium tanks, with a wide observation deck forward, and a jet-powered hovercar sitting on the fantail. Toni stood on the foredeck, staring out across tens of thousands of square clicks of dazzling white cloud plain, wishing he were in Verona. Beneath him, below the cloud plain, lay Ariel's surface, a pressure-cooked caldron of searing hot winds and greenhouse gases. Partial terraforming had given the planet a rudimentary biosphere based on mountain tops and high plateaus. Incompletely habitable, Ariel was very much a work in progress.

Telescopic vision let Toni make out their destination, the ringwall of Elysium poking through the sea of clouds. A massive volcanic caldera rearing up into the biosphere, Elysium formed a huge natural amphitheater more than a hundred clicks across, a great green bowl of misty jungle, surrounded by stadium-like walls.

Seeing Elysium ringwall reminded Toni of the Arena in Verona—the ancient Roman amphitheater that the Lady-in-Gold had vanished into. Seized by the image, his mind immediately tried to catapult back to Verona. Toni fought the impulse. Such spontaneous flashbacks terrified him. They were symptoms of acute mental feedback, severe glitches in his neural circuitry. A hazard Toni would rather not think about—and one he had to hide from his employers at all cost. If Dragon Hunt suspected him of having cybernetic seizures, they would yank his program—stranding him in real time.

The jolt of landing helped jerk Toni back to reality. The landing zone sat on a cleared semicircle blasted out of the crater rim, big enough for the barge and a base camp. A trail sloped downward, choked with cycad fronds and tall bamboo. Vines and creepers kept Toni from seeing more than a couple of meters into the tangle.

Happy to be back in control of his augmented psyche, Toni helped with the unloading, piling safari supplies about the landing site. Turning up his hypersensitive hearing, he tried to tell if the Hunt Guide had noticed his lapse.

"... but with the brain shot the angle of entry varies too much to rely on surface features. Don't count on aiming between the eye cells. Or above the mandibles." The Guide was giving a short lecture on the best way to scramble a Wyvyrn's neuroanatomy.

"What *should* I aim for?" Gracchus asked. His weapon hung loosely from one huge hand—a long gray 30mm recoilless minicannon, with a padded shoulder rest and a broad ugly snout.

"Imagine a line running between the bases of the primary antennae.

The Wyvyrn's cerebrum is a barbell-shaped pair of ganglia midway along that line."

Gracchus grunted. "Sounds tricky."

"It is," the Guide admitted, "unless you're close enough to tickle its tonsils. You might want to try for heart number one. It is located in the center of the second segment back from the head. . . ."

Fine. The Guide was too busy bullshitting Gracchus to care what his cyborgs were up to. It surprised Toni that someone so obviously successful as Gracchus could fall for such a shuck. But the allure—and expense—of a *real* hunt, with *real* prey, was too much for folks with more money than sense.

Toni had a true 3V addict's contempt for "real" adventure. For a tiny fraction of the cost, Gracchus could be a 3V Beowulf, or Siegfried. He could kill Fafnir, battle sea serpents, and fuck Brunhilde, all without leaving home. But that would be too much like the plebs.

Toni looked about, seeing the impassive Chimp bodyguards. And Gracchus's two wives, now drenched in sweat. Selene's fairy gown was drooping, and smeared with silver dust. Pandora looked cooler in her leopard-spotted leotard. Neither dared to complain.

Why haul everyone through this? Dragging folks about in the flesh—just to show that Gracchus had the power and money to make it happen. The Guide's little bullshit lecture made no mention of *collared* Wyvyrn. Wyvyrn were flying megafauna from Beta Hydri IV. Huge hundred-meter, semi-intelligent, flying omnivores, with less reason to tangle with humans than lions had. Humans didn't taste good to them—and normally they had sense enough to stay out of their way. To get them to cooperate, Dragon Hunt went into Elysium ahead of time and collared a couple of prime specimens. Once collared, the Wyvyrn could be made to stick around. Even attack. Without control collars, Gracchus would be lucky to see a Wyvyrn, much less get off a "brain" shot.

It was all as phony as 3V. Only less comfortable, and a damned sight more expensive. Which, alas, was the point. So long as Toni was paid, he kept his complaints to himself. Besides, who cared what a cyborg thought?

The Guide signaled with his hand, and they set out. Harpo went ahead, hacking out a path. Toni lifted a field shelter, ration case, and microstove, along with a hundred-odd kilos of baggage and ammunition, falling in behind Doc.

The first couple of clicks were dense brush, a claustrophobic pile of creepers and wrist-thick bamboo, crisscrossed with lianas and strangler vine. Toni kept station a dozen meters behind Doc, turning when he turned.

Without warning, the tangle suddenly opened overhead. Toni strode into a cool cathedral forest of kilometer-tall trees festooned with great red

perfumed blossoms. Slanting Prospero light glittered off the wings of giant insects flitting from flower to flower. A forest imp flew by, a tiny pale humanoid with huge gold eyes, riding on the back of a two-meter dragonfly.

Toni kept his optical sensors aimed low, trying not to tread on the humans hidden by tall ferns and elephant grass. Ten more hours of slogging and he could go back to Verona.

*"Myself was from Verona banished
For practicing to steal away a lady..."
—Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act IV*

Via Venezia

At first light, the morning after Carnival, the Noble Dog rode across the *Ponte Romano*, the ancient stone bridge over the Adige, leaving Verona. Green suburban hills rose up on the far bank, dotted with palaces, pleasure gardens, churches, and Roman ruins. After him came Proteus with the led horses.

Antonio now had a name to put behind the mask—a name, but not a face. His Lady-in-Gold was Silvia Lucetta Visconti, the daughter of Matteo Visconti, exiled Lord of Milan, reputed to be the most beautiful woman in northern Italy. Proteus had come up with this news, along with word that she had taken the road east towards Padua and Venice. Antonio's manservant was a wizard at ferreting out information—part Gypsy and part thief—never failing to turn up a useful fact. Always anticipating Antonio's wants, and seeing to his needs.

That he had still not seen Silvia made her all the more attractive. Every woman Antonio knew paled in comparison to how he pictured her—no flesh-and-blood female could hope to compete with his imagination.

This obsession led to caustic words between Antonio and his uncle Cangrande, the Big Dog—sparking a family argument that rebounded off the romanesque arches of Cangrande's audience chamber, keeping servants and mistresses awake well after midnight. The Lord of Verona had an absurdly cherubic face, pierced by a pair of sharp compelling eyes. Dismissing Silvia Visconti out of hand, he reminded his nephew of the "bad blood in that family." (The Vipers of Milan were infamous for savage despotism, murderous cruelty, and engaging in all manner of sexual manias—in addition to giving good government and encouraging the arts.) How could the daughter of an exiled enemy be a fit object for marriage?

"Who said I mean to marry her?" Antonio retorted. Being obsessed with a woman was a poor excuse to wed her.

The Big Dog was not mollified. "What if you get her in pup? The bitch could be bait. I do not want any half-Visconti bastards running about, hoping to be put up as heirs to Verona."

Down-and-out though they were, it remained the Visconti dream to hold all the Piedmont, plus as much of Tuscany and the Veneto as they could grab. Even in exile, they were far too cozy with the Emperor—and would happily use Verona as a step to regain Milan. "Have no more to do with her," Cangrande commanded, his habitual inane grin masking a ruthless will no sane nephew dared brook.

Bidding the Big Dog a stormy farewell, Antonio stalked off to do as he pleased. His obsession might be unhealthy—but by God it was *his*. If he wanted a horse or a dog, he got it. Women were at least as important. True, he did feel a little like that old fool Dante, who still mooned over some woman he had glimpsed in the market decades ago. But at least Antonio was going *after* his Silvia, not locking himself away in a borrowed room, wasting paper on some impossible *terza rima* epic to her.

On the east bank of the Adige, he passed the *Teatro Romano*, the ancient open-air theater, and the old cathedral of Santo Stefano with its great octagonal red-brick campanile. There he paused, treating himself to a last view of the city, wreathed in breakfast smoke and still recovering from Carnival. Then he was off, riding through the *Porta Vescovo*, with Proteus at his heels.

The *Corso Venezia*, the dusty via Venezia that led to Padua, Venice, and the sea, rolled through green pastures cut with stone fences. Antonio stopped only once near Soave to rest the horses, and put in a supply of light, dry white wine. On his left, vineyards came right down to the road. In the hazy distance he could see the Alps.

At the bridge over the Alpone, he caught up with her. Just past the fork that leads to Belfiore, Antonio spotted the woman a few hundred paces ahead, riding a pretty black mare. Even at a distance, there was no mistaking her. She wore the same lace mask, and her gold-link belt glittered in the sun. Besides, by now Antonio knew her style. There was not another young noblewoman in North Italy likely to be riding alone on the Venice road. She gave him a single over-the-shoulder glance, then, with a flick of her mare's tail, she made for the bridge.

Giving spur, Antonio set off at a gallop. Mounted on a blooded stallion with twice the strength of her little mare, he felt certain that he had her. As they neared the bridge, he cut her lead to two hundred paces. Then one hundred. Then fifty. Then twenty. He could see the Visconti serpents on her horsecloth.

But by then they were into the bridge traffic, peddlers pushing hand-carts, and a big hay wagon half-blocking the ramp. Peasants with their bundles leaped into the ditches rather than be trampled, but the carts could not be brushed aside. Antonio had to rein in. Weaving deftly be-

tween the obstacles, she beat him to the bridge, and, as soon as she was over it, she picked up speed, opening the gap.

Cursing like a *condottiere*, Antonio forced his way through the throng with the flat of his sword. On the far side of the bridge was the town of Villanova, where the road forked. The right fork ran south along the Alpone through the marshes to Arcola. The left fork kept on along the line of the Chiampo, headed for Venice and Padua.

Again, Antonio had to rein in. There was no telling which fork she had taken. But she was headstrong and willful, not likely to change direction just because a man was after her. So he put spurs to his stallion and took the left fork, keeping to the Via Venezia.

Beyond San Bonifacio, he caught sight of her. Giving a great hurrah, he redoubled his efforts. But by now, his horse was blown. Her mare must have been better rested—as well as carrying a lighter load. Getting her second wind, the filly easily kept her distance, daring his stallion to catch her. The chase slowed from a gallop, to a canter, then finally to a tired trot, with his winded mount unable to gain on her mare.

Antonio heard a hail behind him. Twisting in his saddle, he turned to see Proteus pounding up behind him with the led horses—just when he needed the man most.

Proteus had a spare mount already saddled and ready to ride. Tired as he was, Antonio did not bother to rein in. Instead, Proteus brought the fresh horse up alongside his, and Antonio leaped aboard his new mount without breaking stride, shouting his thanks. Proteus handed him the horse's reins, then dropped back, taking charge of the winded stallion. He was one manservant in a million—worth the price of a duchy!

Surging forward on his fresh mount, Antonio ran head-down at full gallop, the mane whipping his face. Silvia's tired mare had no chance. The distance shrank rapidly—two hundred paces. One hundred. Fifty. They hit a long stretch of rising ground, doubly favoring his fresh horse. He closed the gap, tasting her dust in his mouth, seeing little clods thrown up by the hooves of her flagging mare. Her blue eyes showed in the mask holes when she looked back. Tall towers and castle battlements reared above the hill ahead, overlooking Montecchio Maggiore, but Antonio meant to have her long before she reached the town.

Three horsemen appeared atop the rise, emerging silently from the trees along the road to stand silhouetted at the crest. They were dressed in carnival garb—a Saracen, a Jester, and a Plague Doctor. Parting ranks, they let Silvia pass between them. As she disappeared over the crest, they closed up, cutting Antonio off.

Damn. Another emergency call. This was more than Toni could take. He found his cyborg body right where he had left it, sitting on a mossy

jungle trail beside a pile of baggage. Great vine-covered tree-ferns towered over him, their huge fronds shading the path.

He stood up, shooing off the forest imps that were climbing curiously over the baggage pile. "What is it? And it better be bad."

"The worst." That was Harpo.

"We lost the client." Doc cut in.

Toni was up and trotting down the trail, leaving the baggage to the forest imps. "Wasn't he radio-tagged?"

"Not lost like in misplaced. Lost like in *dead*."

"Torn to pieces," Harpo explained.

"Wyvyrn got him," Ali added.

They were nervous as hell, all talking at once. "Bullshit!" Toni retorted, giving his snap professional opinion.

"See for yourself," Harpo suggested.

Toni got to see it all different ways. First in 3V, then through his own optical sensors. The kill site looked like some huge mowing machine had gone berserk. Shattered tree-ferns leaned at crazy angles. Big lycopods lay broken and uprooted. Even the mossy forest floor was gouged and furrowed. A great gaping hole ripped in the canopy overhead showed where the Wyvyrn had made its exit.

And there was blood all about. Big splotches of it stained the moss. Smaller drops speckled the torn fronds. In the center of the broken clearing sat a SuperChimp's head, glaring at the mess.

Reviewing recordings was singularly unproductive. The Guide had gone on ahead to "flush" the Wyvyrn. Gracchus and his bodyguards had been waiting, armed with enough firepower to take out a platoon of light tanks—staring at the surrounding wall of cycads, fern fronds, hanging lianas; and vine covered trunks, all about as transparent as green-painted reactor shielding. Until you've been on a Wyvyrn hunt, you'll never be able to imagine how hard it is to spot a hundred-meter flying monster in dense cover.

A faint rustle off to the right caught everyone's attention. Then the Wyvyrn burst on them.

There was no time for a brain shot, heart shot, or even a frantic toe stab. Toni got to see the carnage from three different angles—from the point of view of Gracchus and his two Chimp bodyguards. One of the Chimps lasted the longest, but all he saw was his master being shredded before the Wyvyrn turned on him. So much for realtime adventure.

And the sickest part was that Dragon Hunt had set it all up, using the Wyvyrn's control collar, electronically torturing a semi-intelligent omnivore until it turned killer. Some "sport." Brutal, but *real*. Which was what Gracchus had paid for—at least he got his money's worth.

Meticulous search of the area turned up a profusion of body parts, some of them human. But only one object of interest—a torn diamond

neckpiece, and several loose stones. Toni recognized it as soon as Harpo showed it to him. "It's Pandora's slave collar."

"She's missing," Harpo informed him.

Toni scoffed, "No shit."

"The blood on the stones came from a Chimp," Doc added. "She could still be alive."

"Right." Toni remembered her at the dock, cheerfully handing out stim pills—and a pair of earrings. "But for how long?" If the Wyvyrn carried her off, they were going to have a godawful time finding the body.

"Well, we've got to make the attempt." That was Ali, always the optimist.

Toni could see an absolutely pointless search stretching out ahead of them. Of course they had to make the attempt. But Elysium covered thousands of square clicks, most of it as dense as the morass around them. Given time and patience, each square centimeter could be gone over for clues, until something turned up. But when they did find parts of Pandora, so what? Dragon Hunt was dead. They had just killed one of the richest men in the galaxy. No one was going to award them points for bringing back pieces of his most junior wife.

The Court of a Million Lies

Antonio arrived in Venice by boat, one of the small lateen-rigged craft that ply the lagoon, with their strange hooked masts and old-fashioned side rudders. A crude, ungainly means of transport, utterly beneath his station—but the easiest way to enter the island republic, unless you had wings, or were willing to swim.

Braced against the curved prow, he watched "Byzantium's Favorite Daughter" draw closer, seeming to rise up out of the low gleaming lagoon chop. At first, all he could see were roofs and upper floors, topped by bell towers, cupolas, oriental battlements, fancifully colored domes, and the lace-like stone façades that gave the city her Eastern cast. A vision built on mudflats. Then came the jumble of walkways, bridges, streets, canals, and the great mass of pilings that kept Venice from washing out to sea. Venice had no city gates, no rich or poor quarters. Lines of wash hung over side canals and small alleys. Ships' masts moved among the steeples.

At the Cannaregio docks, Antonio sent Proteus prowling into the city for news of his quarry, while he changed to a black gondola, setting out down the "Canal Regio." Cats prowled near the Campo San Giobbe—but the nearby church stood empty. Bells were gone from the church towers, packed away in straw. Venice lay under a papal interdict. A theological calamity that meant no masses, no communion, no Holy Mother Church

to stand between the people of Venice and the fires of Hell. Worse yet, God-fearing merchants were free to renounce their debts to Venice and plunder her cargoes.

Uncorking a bottle of bardolino, Antonio offered it to the gondolier, asking what he thought of the ban. The man stopped poling, took a swig, and thought it through. He was a blunt broad-shouldered brute who made his living with his back, and clearly cared little for mainland nobility. He admitted in thick Venetian, "I miss the bells. But interdict also means no marriage and no confession. Twin blessings there!"

Antonio laughed and called him a scoundrel.

He took a second swig. "And no Holy Inquisition."

Antonio ventured that Venice was coming out well ahead.

"So it would be, were it not for the dead."

"Death undoes us all," Antonio agreed, eyeing the houses piled one atop the other. No church burials badly burdened a city that saw deaths every day but lacked fields to take the bodies. Dig too deeply and they'd be burying folks at sea.

"What is your lordship's religion?" the gondolier asked.

"I don't speak French." Antonio's stock reply. It was what some Flemish burgher said to Robert of Artois, brother-in-law to King Philip of France, before braining the Count with a club at the battle of Courtrai.

The gondolier laughed, handed back the bottle, and began poling again. The French had managed to put religion to shame, beating one Pope to death and poisoning the next. Clement V was their creature, afraid to set foot in Rome, keeping the Papacy in Babylonian Captivity at Avignon—which the French claimed to be part of Italy since Avignon was a fief of the Two Sicilies, making a farce of both faith and geography. Clement V and Philip the Fair had gone on to commit the crime of the century, looting the treasury of the Knights Templars, burning and torturing innocent knights—including the aged Grand Master, who was godfather to Philip's children. It was hard to fear a church that put faith and justice up for sale.

The Canal Regio ran right into the Canalazzo, the Grand Canal, a magnificent S-shaped waterway that cut sweeping backward curves through the heart of Venice, following the bed of an ancient river now buried beneath wharves, *palazzi*, and granaries. Barges and pleasure boats crowded the city's greatest thoroughfare, grand showpiece, and primary sewer. Merchant princes could walk out of their doors onto a gangway and not step ashore again until they were in Marseilles or Alexandria.

Antonio got off at the Rialto, in the city center, beside the only bridge spanning the Grand Canal. Cogs and trading galleys unloaded in the shadow of the silent and empty San Giacomo, disgorging wares from around the world—wheat, figs, frankincense, almonds, Byzantine glass,

and slaves from the East. Proteus caught up with him at a stall selling perfumed lace and dyed wax. "Tonight she'll be at the Court of a Million Lies, attending a fête in her honor."

Antonio nodded. He knew this type of commercial *soirée* stocked with overfed ignoramuses and flirtatious women. Ordinarily, he found them as inviting as the plague.

"And on the morrow," Proteus added, "she will be gone."

"Gone? Where?" Would she ever stop running?

"A merchant galley is waiting at San Marco to take her to the East."

"In God's name, *why*?"

"She is heiress to Visconti lands in the Levant worth millions of ducats. Word is she wants a new life."

What woman did not? Antonio aimed to give her one.

"If you are to succeed with her, it must be tonight, at the Court of a Million Lies."

"Of course I'll succeed." Antonio never failed.

"Naturally." His manservant made a mocking bow. If Proteus weren't irreplaceable, Antonio would have booted him into a canal.

The Court of a Million Lies, just north of the Rialto on the outskirts of Cannaregio, was really two courts: the Court of the First Million Lies, and the Court of the Second Million Lies. Both were owned by the Polo family, Venice's most notorious merchant adventurers. A villainous-looking Tartar, with dark slanted eyes and a devil's leer, greeted guests at the door. He wore Polo livery and had been christened "Peter" after the doorman to Heaven.

Inside, the crowd was equally mixed. Antonio saw brown, black, and tan faces, beneath fur hats, damask turbans, and scented peacock feathers. He heard Greek, Spanish, Arabic, and every type of Italian—mostly in male tones. Venice took after the East, where good wives stayed at home and only whores walked the streets. But Silvia was there, attended by old Marco Polo's own daughters, acting the gracious guest of honor. (A Visconti Pope had blessed the Polo mission to Kublai Khan.) She had exchanged her mask for a gold half-veil. Blue eyes flashed Antonio a greeting as he came in.

He hastened to present himself to Master Marco, who was busy spinning tales of the East to drunken skeptics. An Italian scoffer waved a wine cup, asking if the holy *yogis* of India really went about buck-naked, "With their members hanging out. They sound as shameless as Dominicans."

"So they do," Marco assured him. "But by living in abstinence, they do not use the male member for sin. They say it is no more sinful to show it than your hand or your face."

Someone snickered, "And what about those who sin with hand and face?" The skeptic still looked doubtful, "With all this abstinence, how can there be so *many* of them?"

Marco shrugged. "The East is vast, with multitudes of people and customs. In some provinces in Cathay, they care so little for chastity that wives take in strangers off the road. If a husband finds a traveler's cloak hanging by the door, he stays away, even for days at a time."

Men laughed. Stories like this had earned him the name Marco of the Million Lies. "Sounds like France," someone suggested. "The poor sods. Our wives at least have the Christian decency to do it behind our backs!"

"That's not the way they see it," Polo protested. "The traveler leaves the wife some token payment, a trinket, or bit of cloth. Both husband and wife see him off, waving the token. 'This was yours,' they say. 'Now it is ours. What are you taking away with you? Nothing at all!'"

A woman's favors might well be nothing, but Antonio had ridden halfway across Italy for one particular woman. Thanking his host, he strode across the court to where Silvia waited alongside a fountain whose demi-god faces spit wine into a silver basin. He could see her lively eyes above the veil. The same eyes that laughed at him in Verona at Carnival. He bowed. "Silvia Lucetta Visconti."

"Bold Antonio, you have caught me at last."

"Not without effort," he admitted. It was the first time he had heard her voice, but already it sounded familiar—as familiar as the form he had been chasing for days.

"Are you ready to lift my veil, and claim your reward?"

"More than ready." Antonio had never seen a minx so secure in her mystery. He reached out, seizing her veil, triumphantly drawing it aside. When he saw her face, his hand froze. He stared speechless. Beneath the gold veil and blonde wig was the face of Pandora—Gracchus' junior wife—last seen at the site of the Wyvyrn attack. Her lips parted. "Save me," she whispered. "Save me, bold Antonio."

*"... I am but a shadow;
And to your shadow will make true love."
—Proteus, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act IV*

But a Shadow

Toni jerked off his headset, staring at the walls of the sanitary unit. This was way worse than any flashback. Virtual junkies got used to being dumped into the middle of a street brawl at Carnival or having long dead friends tap you on the shoulder. But nothing topped a whiff of reality invading your dreams. He punched PROTEUS.

An answer flashed back: PROGRAM ERROR—PLEASE WAIT—FREE FOUR HOUR UPGRADE.

Four free hours. Wow! How generous. Way too generous for some little

program glitch. Upgrades usually came measured in minutes. PROTEUS was going to great expense to get him to sit tight and not ask questions, waiting for his reward like one of Pavlov's dogs.

Toni leapt up, jerking the glucose drip out of his arm, shutting down his life-support pack, pulling on his pants. He might be an addict, but he wasn't an idiot. Toni knew what happened to lab dogs when they were no longer needed.

Tucking his deck and his life-support pack under his arm, he hit the release on the sanitary unit door. He hated leaving the exercise bike. Bright slanting sunlight nearly blinded him. Half-blind and wobbly on his feet, he steadied himself against the open door, getting his eyes in focus. "Elvis Saves," was scrawled above the words OUT OF ORDER.

Peeling OUT OF ORDER off the door, he put the letters in his pocket to use later—if he ever got the chance. Then he set off at a stumbling run down a wooded path. The sanitary unit sat in a little-used part of a public park. Kilometer-tall trees soared overhead. Brightly colored flying eels snaked between vine-covered trunks.

For the first time in days, Toni had to move under his own power. He did not find it easy. Or comfortable. Were it not for Ariel's .5 gravity, he would have had to do it on all fours. He tottered up a side trail leading to a cargo field on the shoulder of Mt. Beanstalk. Above him towered the peak, with the razor-straight Beanstalk disappearing into the deep blue stratosphere.

Toni did not see the spark falling from orbit, but he heard the blast as it hit. Shock waves rattled the foliage, showering him with twigs. Scratch one sanitary unit. Alarms rang across the cargo field. Cargo handlers in mint-striped coveralls raced over, peering into the vegetation, though there was nothing left to see. Whoever offered him FOUR FREE HOURS had not even waited two minutes before blowing his dingy cubicle to bits. They must have assumed he was a moron. Hopefully, they now assumed he was a dead moron.

As guards came running up to take their look, Toni walked casually the other way. Women in shorn hair and green-striped coveralls grinned at him. Smiles were all they had to offer—their only way to look attractive.

Disheveled and out of shape, breathing hard from the run upslope, Toni did not fancy himself overly handsome. But these women had gone months, maybe years, without a man. The mere fact that he was walking free put him way ahead of the guys they were used to seeing. Swiftly, he searched out a matronly female trustee in loading and packaging, offering his life-support pack for cargo-class passage to Elysium. Toni had a bulging credit file, but dared not touch it—not so long as he planned to stay dead.

She readily agreed. What he wanted was only mildly illegal—and the

support pack was crammed with drugs and paraphernalia. Stuff that could keep you entertained for weeks in lockup. Giggling mint-striped prisoners loaded him into a cushioned bio-container. The trustee, easily twice Toni's age, with a long sentence behind her, leaned in and kissed him, pressing her breasts against him beneath the coveralls. Whispering "Sweet dreams," she closed the lid. The box sealed.

Curled in the dark, Toni reviewed the news channels. ("The armed merchant cruiser *M. Licinius Crassus* regrets the accidental launching of an Osiris orbit-to-surface missile. Luckily, the missile impacted in a sparsely populated area, causing no significant structural damage except to a public toilet.") But the top story remained the hunting death of Transgalactic tycoon Alexander Gracchus. ("A member of his party is still listed as missing.") Much bigger news than some blown-up outhouse.

Presently, he felt himself being loaded aboard a ballistic cargo carrier. Toni could still smell the warm odor of the woman who had tucked him in, reminding him how shitty some people's "real" lives were. What had she done to deserve a lonely, single-sex realtime existence, locked away when she was not working. Not much, he bet. Whoever murdered Alexander Gracchus was bound to be doing way better.

And murder it was. Whatever slim chance had existed that this was all some ghastly hunting mishap had been punctured by Pandora turning up alive in Verona. Alive and on the run. Having known, or seen, too much. Clearly, she was supposed to have died along with Gracchus and his Chimp bodyguards. But she must have seen it coming, and set up her escape ahead of time—using PROTEUS to get Toni's attention. Damn it, why had she picked *him*? Didn't she know he was an addict?

Answer was, she *did* know. It must be one of the reasons why she'd picked him. It made him easy to manipulate. Desperate people have few scruples about other folks' weaknesses. She had tapped into his private 3V fantasy even before coming down the Beanstalk—catching his attention at Carnival, making sure he'd come after her.

And whoever killed Gracchus had traced her contact through PROTEUS. No surprise there. Gracchus had been murdered *through* PROTEUS—using the Wyvyrn's control collar. Huge winged megafauna made nifty murder weapons. Pandora and her would-be killers had been conducting a silent duel in cyberspace, while Gracchus stalked his Wyvyrn, and the Noble Dog panted after Silvia Visconti.

Which was why Toni had to stay off the net—playing dead. Not using PROTEUS until he absolutely had to. Surprise was his best weapon. Whoever did all this was *not* infallible. They'd missed Pandora. And they'd missed him. If only by an angstrom.

His thoughts were still spinning in these circles when the ballistic transport's engines roared to life. G-forces slammed him into the cubicle cushioning. Like many stretches of realtime, the flight fast became a

hideous bore. Interminable minutes of banging off padded walls. Inflight entertainment consisted of Toni tossing his cookies in free-fall.

He emerged battered and dirty on a cargo pad overlooked by the Elysium rimwall. A far better place for his purposes than the usual entry ports atop the rim—less used, and watched over solely by security cams and a trusting crew of maintenance Chimps. Best of all, the cargo pad possessed a clean, vacant public toilet. Adept at bathing from a sink, while doing his laundry in the hand drier, Toni used the time to check on the search, tapping into Ali, Doc, and Harpo's control channel. The search pattern had tightened. Large sections of the crater floor had been gone over, or ruled out. The remaining area continued to shrink.

It took time to crack the code on the Wyvyrn's control collar without alerting PROTEUS. But the code ended up being a simple binary transposition—any more encryption would have drawn unwanted attention to Dragon Hunt. The Wyvyrn also turned out to be in the prime search area.

Great. The more the merrier. Luckily the monster lay immobilized, paralyzed by its collar, pinned down now that it was no longer needed. Toni meant to do something about that—but not right now.

First, he had to find Pandora. Not a pleasing prospect. It meant going *in person* into Elysium—since he couldn't use his cyborg body without alerting PROTEUS. But he had no choice. Someone who had murdered the richest man in this part of the spiral arm would gladly invest a couple of megacredits in making Toni go away. Pandora was his only protection. Come up with her alive, and he had half a chance. Without her, he would just be some homeless 3V addict with a weird story and an outrageous price on his head. An acutely terminal condition.

And he had to do it alone. The planetary authorities might be tough on drug addicts and tax cheats, but they were hardly up to interstellar conspiracies. Pair-a-Dice Security could care less what happened onplanet. And the Freeport Police were completely corrupt. Their idea of lending a hand would be to hold Toni for the highest bidder.

But the absolute worst of it was having to do it in *realtime*. In Verona, this would be no problem. Antonio the Noble Dog never failed at anything. But he was not Antonio. And this was not 3V. This was the *real* world—where everything could (and *did*) go wrong. Here, he could fail. Or *die*. God, how he hated realtime! In Verona, none of this would even be *happening*.

Being the only human at the cargo pad, he had the run of the place. To take him into the crater, Toni selected a skycycle, a hydrogen-filled parasail with a solar-assisted pedal propeller. He could not chance using his own credit, but he easily convinced the simple-minded rent-a-stand to charge the flight to a regular client's account.

Toni peddled the skycycle straight off the cargo pad into an updraft

along the windward side of the rimwall. Here hot surface air and prevailing winds blowing out of Nightside formed a great standing wave, rolling over Elysium rim. This was the easiest entrance to Elysium, and the air above the rim swarmed with fliers, orthopters, and sailplanes. He felt comfortably lost in the crowd. Beneath him, a green canopy of kilometer-tall trees filled the bottom of the crater, climbing up almost to the rim.

From his perch among the tourists and pleasure seekers, Toni kept tabs on the search below—happily letting Ali, Doc, and Harpo do the leg work. He beat back and forth to windward, listening in on their calls. Hours on the exercise bike had kept his calves in shape, and soaring allowed him to save his strength for one frantic burst once they found Pandora.

Harpo hit the trail first. Chemosensors and a heat trace picked up Pandora's track, and Harpo's cyborg body went crashing after her, calling on Doc and Al to bring the hovercar. Swooping down, Toni plunged through a break in the canopy. Getting ahead of Harpo, he dodged in among the tall trunks, keeping between the upper canopy and the tangle of ground cover, hopefully showing himself to Pandora.

Harpo signaled that he had an infrared contact, bearing ZERO-THREE-ZERO, just shy of a large clearing caused by the fall of a forest giant. Toni headed for the contact, spiraling down through slanting lanes of Prospero light filled with gaily colored day moths.

Pandora had picked a perfect spot for her pick-up. The fallen Goliath had taken out a dozen lesser trees, tearing a huge rent in the canopy. Clear sky showed through the ragged hole, and much of the tangle beneath had been flattened by falling timbers. Toni set down atop a mossy pile of toppled logs. Insects whirled up to greet him.

Pandora appeared, breaking cover to Toni's left, still wearing her synthetic leopard-skin. Her thigh-length boots were covered in mud, and her lacquered hair had drooping spikes—otherwise she seemed in decent shape. Scrambling atop the log pile, she leaped from timber to timber toward him.

Toni lifted an eyebrow as she hopped aboard the skycycle behind him, landing on the back half of the banana seat. "Lady Silvia Lucetta Visconti?"

"Sorry about that, I was incredibly desperate." She sounded as if she meant it, particularly the last part. Her arms looped around his waist, pressing her hips against his back. "Let's go!"

"You almost got me killed," he pointed out.

"Might still happen," she assured him.

As if bent on proving her right, Harpo came crashing out of the undergrowth. Cyborg faces cannot register shock, but Harpo did come to a dead stop, sensors pointed forward. Not waiting for Harpo to recover, Toni kicked the emergency release on the skycycle's hydrogen bottle.

The cycle's gas bag ballooned above them, lifting the skycycle off the log pile. Toni backpedaled furiously, keeping them aimed at the hole in the canopy. Harpo dwindled until he looked like a plasti-metal toy abandoned in the clearing.

Pandora pulled them tighter together. Spiked hair tickled his neck. "Smashing. Absolutely smashing," she purred into his ear—her voice had a rich timbre to it, worthy of a Visconti heiress. Or a beautiful, wealthy young widow, with holdings in a dozen star systems. Obviously on top of the universe, she started giving orders, "Head for the Beanstalk. There's a gravity-drive yacht waiting on Pair-a-Dice. A Fornax Skylark—fast enough to get us comfortably lost."

Toni nodded, happy to have somewhere to run to. But at the moment, he had his hands full with the here-and-now, keeping the overloaded skycycle on an even keel while balancing his 3V deck on his lap. No easy task with Pandora holding tight to him, hips and breasts pressed against his spine, her hands clasped just above his groin. He eyed her over his shoulder. "Doing okay?"

"Sure, great. Can't you tell?" She plainly aimed to make the most of the moment. Passing through the canopy, Toni kept on going, meaning to get all the height he could out of the gas bag. For a laboring skycycle trying to make a quick getaway, altitude is everything.

Trouble appeared almost at once. A silver gleam below them whipped into a quick climbing turn. The Dragon Hunt hovercar. Doc and Ali must have picked up Harpo and were now coming for him.

He shouted to Pandora, "Hold tight." Releasing the gas bag and the spent hydrogen bottle, Toni put the skycycle into a screaming dive. He had no chance of outrunning a jet-powered hovercar, but the dive would give him airspeed to work with—and the chance to make something happen.

Doc put in a call to him, "Toni, what in hell do you think you're doing?"

Having no good answer, Toni hung grimly into the dive. Treetops rushed up to greet him. The hovercar did another fast turn and bored after him. "Give it up, Toni, we've got the speed to run you down." That was Harpo.

They had the speed, but not the agility. Spotting a hole in the forest canopy, Toni side-slipped and angled in, dodging between kilometer-tall trunks. The hovercar could not follow without risking hitting its rotors on the foliage or whacking into a tree. They had to throttle down just to draw even with him.

"Come on, Toni, we can make a deal." That was Doc again, ever the reasonable one.

"I doubt it." No deals. Toni had them right where he wanted them. He backpedaled, forcing them to come to a complete halt, hovering just above the canopy. Branches rattled in the propwash.

"Nobody cares about you," Harpo assured him.

Toni smirked. "Tell me something I *don't* know."

"Give up the woman and we'll see you get away." Ali tried to sound like they had his interests at heart.

Toni was not even tempted. Without Pandora, he was just a loose end, waiting to be done away with. "They're going to kill her," he reminded them. "Just like they killed Gracchus."

"That's not our business," Harpo protested.

"Too bad, it should be." Toni hit the control key on his deck, sending out a coded signal.

The Wyvyrn roared out of its hiding place, saber-like mandibles flashing, wing segments beating, spine-tipped tail lashing. Given what had happened, the great segmented beast didn't need much encouragement from its control collar to fly into a blind frenzy. Toni merely gave its anger direction.

Doc managed to get off an anguished MAYDAY before the monster hit. Imagine a huge hundred-meter centipede, with wings instead of feet, slamming into the light plastic-aluminum hovercar. The ship's lifting body hull crumpled, and the hovercar flipped over, spinning out of control. It went whirling into the canopy, with the Wyvyrn still clinging to the hull, stabbing at it again and again with its giant stinging tail.

"That will teach you to trifle with the Noble Dog!" Toni couldn't hang around to enjoy the virtual deaths of Doc, Ali, and Harpo's cyborg bodies. Putting business ahead of pleasure, he pedaled off between the trees. Soon he was lost among the tourists swarming atop the standing wave at Elysium's windward rim.

Pandora sat comfortably safe in her yacht, a drink in her hand, her back to the Skylark's main viewport, looking like she had swallowed the canary. A mobile auto-bar, stood moored beside her couch, serving up a frothy blue liquor that misted like liquid oxygen.

Behind her, projected in the viewport, lay Pair-a-Dice yacht harbor, backed by starlit void. Pair-a-Dice had grown in haphazard fashion from the original geosync station and Beanstalk terminus. Pleasure domes and gaming palaces came right up to the harbor edge, sticking out at odd angles amid the repair slips and taxi stands. The whole gleaming jumble ended abruptly in empty space. The "harbor" was merely a parking area around the geosync point. A couple of orbital yachts were clearly visible, and taxis going ship to shore showed up as tiny moving sparks. But most of the parked spacecraft were mere points of light, lost among the stars.

She told Toni, "Gracchus was damned good to me. We married for his money, but that didn't make me hate him. Trouble was, too many folks stood to make trillions by his death. Like his bitch of a First Wife, and

her little fuck-mate Selene. You remember her? Came to the Wyvyrn hunt in a faerie gown?"

Toni nodded idly. Pandora had been doing all the talking, happy to be rich and alive.

"I mean, the guy was worth giga-credits. In Aesir system, he owned his own goddamn moon! My measly 2 percent was worth killing for a billion times over." Intersystem law made a small but immutable provision for secondary spouses.

She grinned at him. "Without a doubt, you saved my butt. And I'm gonna be grateful. Outrageously grateful. I'm fabulously rich, which is all I ever wanted to be. And I've seen way too many assholes stepping on people's faces to get somewhere, forgetting who gave them their start. Well, that ain't *me*." Pandora laughed provocatively, "Prepare to be rewarded beyond your wildest dreams!"

Toni stared at her. What he saw was Silvia Lucetta Visconti with her halo of golden hair, lounging on a day bed on the poop royal of her great lateen-rigged trading galley. A handsomely hung serving lad in blue and white Visconti livery stood ready to refill her wine goblet.

Behind her lay the sparkling waters of the Venice lagoon, backed by the tall Campanile and the sun-drenched colonnades of the Piazza San Marco, where the Grand Canal came sweeping out of the city, headed toward the sea. Toni could see the twin Columns of Execution marking the sea gate to Venice, and the Greek bell-and-onion domes of San Marco Basilica poking above the Doge's new Gothic palace. At the moment, Venice was besieged by high water. Wavelets lapped past the twin columns into the Piazzetta, flooding the "finest drawing room in Europe."

Silvia had had the effrontery to suggest that he sail away with her to the East—where she claimed to have inherited rich estates among the Isles. What presumption, even for a Visconti! He was Antonio Cansignorio della Scala, nephew to the prince; not some rich bitch's plaything. If the right people were poisoned, he would be heir to Verona!

And yet—Italy had gotten stale of late, with this obnoxious French Pope and no wars of note. Or at least none worth fighting in. Even Proteus had failed him, plunging Antonio into no end of trouble. And the East was said to be a real eye-opener—if you believed the Polos.

Besides, the Noble Dog had begun to feel he had somehow outgrown Verona. . . ●



Rebecca Ore

COLLECTED OGOENSE

Rebecca Ore's most recent novel, *Gaia's Toys*, was published by Tor in trade paperback last May. Her newest book, *The Outlaw School*, will be out from Avon sometime next year. Of her latest tale for *Asimov's Ms.* Ore says, "A conversation about *hantavirus* with a researcher at the Virginia Museum of Natural History and fish-smuggling tales from members of the American Killie Association and American Cichlid Association led to this story. Bruce Turner, Ph.D., of Virginia Tech was the science consultant."

A word of warning: There are some violent and sexual scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some.

Illustration by Shirley Chan

In the basement of the research institute, Sarafina kept the rainforest killifish that obsessed her. *Oh-go-en-say*, as the nomenclature police would have it spoken, is an *Aphyosemion* species or group of almost identical species from the Ogo drainage of Gabon and Congo. African Rift Lake cichlids evolved the fastest of Earth's fishes, but killifishes in their small disrupted waters were close. Other *Aphyosemions* presented more interesting material, but Sarafina loved the *ogoense*.

For five years, Sarafina took her vacation in Africa and smuggled out fish. Customs never bothered her, as she looked small and older than she

was, a prematurely middle-aged woman in her early thirties, not yet old enough to have to smuggle to aid desperate finances, not young enough to smuggle for adventure.

Sarafina kept all her collected *ogoense* in two air-conditioned closets off her main work space. One was set to vary between 68 degrees at night to 72 during the day. The other closet had night and day temperatures 5 degrees higher. Sarafina wondered how domestication would affect *ogoense*, if more variants would develop in her aquariums.

In the main lab room, Sarafina charted a segment from the fourth chromosome for the Human Genome Project. When the Human Genome Project began, top research scientists had sequenced the DNA themselves. Then, rather than be caught in DNA coils forever, they gave the work over to post-docs, then to senior graduate students and researchers. Sarafina ruefully told herself that her work could have been a small application in military computer code, sequence, and deliver, for all that she ever knew about the final results of it.

I wouldn't look so middle-aged if I had finished my Ph.D. and had my own lab, she thought as she boarded the plane to Libreville.

Another budget trip to Africa. After landing, Sarafina took a taxi to the bush and found children to catch fish for her. Then she packed through AIDS- and Ebola-stricken villages to a branch of the Ogo that had uncollected stretches in it.

Back at the airport, bagged fish in her luggage among the underwear, her bra underwires replaced by plastic tubing stuffed with fish eggs and siliconed closed at the ends, Sarafina saw the airplane coming to take her away, and sighed in relief.

But the man who'd been checking passports and letting Europeans and Americans go without inspecting their luggage looked down at Sarafina's passport, frowned, then checked the number against a laminated sheet. Then he said, "Let me see what's in your luggage."

When coming through US Customs with *Aphyosemion ogoense*, Sarafina pronounced all the vowels and didn't mention the various subspecies to the US Customs agent scrolling through his CITES list of protected animals. Here, she just tensed.

Ogoense males are blue or yellow with broken red stripes, nose to tail. Some subspecies have red bars in the back third of the body. The females are dotted red on an olive body, sometimes with a pale blue shine. Some subspecies had died for new housing developments before anyone even knew they might be in danger.

The man opened Sarafina's suitcases, checking the camera number against her US customs certificate, going through her purse first, then through the small over-night case. A woman came up to help him, and wrestled Sarafina's second suitcase up to the counter and opened it.

Fanatic aquarists had their own species of customs horror stories.

Sarafina stood in her sweat and remembered the two Germans she'd met at an International Betta Conference. The year after she'd met them, they'd died in Brunei trying to cross into Borneo with *Betta macrostoma*, an elongated and less brightly colored kin of the Siamese fighting fish. *Betta macrostoma* had its charms, the orange-and-black-striped tail, the duller orange body, and its more elaborate sex life with its nuptial embrace, the female catching the falling eggs and spitting them at the male, who then brooded them in his large mouth. *A handsome animal*, Sarafina thought, but she wouldn't have chosen to die at the hands of the Royal Brunei Police for it.

Still, she empathized with the passion. She'd heard *Betta* fanciers talk about the route through Borneo into Brunei, then to Kampong Labi, to an elevated lake. The fish, never common, hid in tangles of fallen trees.

"Can you just let me go?" Sarafina asked, tensing. "The plane is ready to take off."

"We let you come in so we could catch you," the woman customs agent said, her hands moving aside the clothes covering the fish bags. "You're stealing from Gabon."

"No!"

Sarafina suddenly attacked the woman with fingernails and teeth and flailing fists. After a shout, and a moment of confused struggle, the two customs agents wrestled her to the concourse floor, then twisted her arms until she almost fainted. "What are you going to do to me?" she asked, when she could get her breath back.

"What do you *think* we're going to do to you?" the woman customs agent asked. Blood streamed from the marks Sarafina's nails had left on her face as she pulled the plastic bags full of fish out of the suitcase. "What are these things in your luggage? We were told to search for the plastic bags of a smuggler."

"Fish," Sarafina answered. The customs agents laughed. Sarafina wondered how many illegal fish collectors they caught in a month. She'd been a fool, she realized; fighting wouldn't help the fish. She stopped struggling. The customs agents pulled all the bags of fish out of Sarafina's clothes, but didn't seem to notice the airline tubing that Sarafina used to replace her bras' underwires. The tubes were full of *ogoense* eggs, siliconed at each pair of ends. As Sarafina looked away from her bras, two guards came up and politely took her to the lieutenant.

As she walked back with her guards, Sarafina thought again about the German *Betta* smugglers. Odd to think of Gregor and Hans dead for patriarchal fish. (When she'd read the brooding classification systems as an eight-year-old, Sarafina had wondered, *Did this make the human family system matriarchal because the females tended the young?*). Had someone informed on them? Had the fish been in plastic bags taped to their bodies? Had the fish been shot, too?

Sarafina had been a graduate student until her funding was eliminated, when society decided it was cruel to train more Ph.D.'s than could get jobs in their fields. Year after year, she charted chromosomal segments. She knew she wasn't the only ex-graduate student working out bits of human-building information. Somewhere in the National Institute of Science, other workers compiled the results, eyes on split screens, fingers calling up the files that clerks loaded on their hard drives at night.

Now she was busted in Africa.

What benefit does this research have to the private sector? the congressmen reviewing grants had asked. Sarafina's work didn't qualify. No one wanted an *Aphyosemion ogoense* genome project. But if the human genome was mastered, the private sector could build better *people*. Rapid evolution in other vertebrates was a political liability when Fundamentalists held the swing votes.

What would the Africans think? The guards brought her through cinderblock halls behind the main concourse to an office door leaking cool air along the bottom. The guards knocked. A voice said, "*Awntrey*," no, *entrez*, French. Sarafina felt her bush French evaporate.

Only two people knew about her collecting trips, her graduate director, who'd known about them for years, and Thomas, who worked on the top floor in environmental education. Sarafina had thought that Thomas would be sympathetic to saving species from drainages damaged by paved roads and clear-cuts, but . . .

We've mingled blood, Sarafina realized as she touched her fingertips to her own cuts. She hoped Gabonese customs agents got frequent AIDS exams.

The guards let her into the office. A Gabonese lieutenant with a nameplate in front of him sat behind a steel desk in the small cement block office, an air conditioner whining in a blocked-up window.

"I don't speak French," Sarafina said. His first name was Joseph, but the family name was African.

"Oh, but I can interrogate in English," the lieutenant replied in crisp British English. He leaned across the steel desk to show her a fax. Thomas, the environmental educator, had faxed Sarafina's photo and passport number to the Gabonese border guards.

Her heart pounded. Bruised from the beating she'd taken from the customs agents, Sarafina felt stupid, physically chastised, as though she were a child. The lieutenant said, "You speak bush French? But just enough to get children to bring you fish. I understand people who collect fish. I lived in England. What are they?"

"*Oh go en say*"—the syllables tripped over her tongue like a nonsense poem, Latinization of an African river name, Ogo. Sarafina wondered why the lieutenant had showed her the fax of the photograph sent under the museum's letterhead? Why would Thomas have risked killing her by

informing on her? In front of the lieutenant, her bloody nose and aching arms embarrassed her more than hurt her.

Old Olaf, the grand Swedish killie fancier, had spent two years in Mexican jails when the border guards found plastic bags of *Megupsilon aporus* taped to his body. He'd been warned not to take fish over the border that way. Border guards might not care about their endangered species, but they knew no one carried anything legal in plastic bags taped under the armpits. Olaf had stayed in jail until his friends found a Mexican official who'd believed that the fish hadn't been loaded with some illegal drug. Sarafina hoped that this African border guard would understand.

She felt the silence that was stretched between the lieutenant and herself and said, "Why did Thomas send you that fax? These *ogoense* are just going to die out as subspecies unless I breed them at home."

"You know the man who sent this fax?"

Sarafina said, "I never thought Thomas took his principles that seriously." But surely Thomas had never expected Sarafina to be beaten, arrested, her fish confiscated. He must have hoped she'd be forbidden entrance at the airport, sent home before she could collect her fish. Or had he sent the fax *after* she'd arrived in Gabon, setting her up for this?

"A Green," said the lieutenant, whose name Sarafina couldn't remember. "I met Greens in Europe." Sarafina realized that his accent wasn't quite college-bred. She wondered how the lieutenant had gotten to England, what it had been like for him, why he'd left? Had he been an illegal?

Sarafina said, "I'm a Green. I do arking. I'm preserving as many varieties of *Aphyosemion ogoense* as I can." No point in mentioning the rapid evolution.

The lieutenant had no specialized knowledge of fish. His face went blank, then he said, "A very European thing to do. Break up the world and keep the components in boxes."

Sarafina almost said, *but I'm not European*, then she realized that to the lieutenant, Europe was a *culture*, not a tribe. "But the fish are being exterminated here. By logging operations, road pavings, oil drilling. Not that I'm opposed to your industrial development, but shouldn't something be saved?" She wished all industrial humans could be moved out of the rainforests, so that it would be left to people who could live gently off what the forest could sustainably provide.

"It's illegal to take fish without proper permits."

Sarafina said, "The fish aren't on the CITES list, and their habitats aren't being protected in this country."

The lieutenant looked back at her, catching her eyes. Sarafina noticed that his eyes were bloodshot. "Is this an adventure to you? You throw fists at my people when they find your plastic bags. You've been beaten. You don't even seem frightened. Isn't Africa *real* to you?"

Before she could think, Sarafina said, "I'm angry."

"What right have you to be angry? You're stealing my country's fish! A poacher, not paying the proper fees."

"I can't believe Thomas would turn me in."

"Ah, Thomas. You rejected this man?"

"We just don't like each other. He says keeping fish in tanks is cruel, says we ought to work to save habitat, not fool ourselves about arking." In this African room, what Thomas believed or what she believed seemed silly. Fish and bat evolutionary tricks couldn't work as fast as human technological change, so now seemed accidents without intentions. *Don't go teleological on me*, Sarafina's advisor had warned her. *The universe has no intentions.*

The lieutenant's eyes, his fleshy eyelids, the broad nostrils flared in perpetual astonishment and disdain, the tribal amulet hanging down over the pseudo-European uniform—all this made worry about cruelty to fish, even worry about saving fish, seem ridiculous. The rainforest was dying. Africans were dying. Sarafina said, "I've seen the dead in the villages." She said that to prove she was compassionate.

"Yes, the dead in the villages. Was it just AIDS, or one of our exotic African viruses? I understand you have endemic Ebola in Reston, Virginia, but it only kills monkeys." He looked down at her passport. "Could you tend your fish in your Chicago if people were dying all around you? I hope not."

Sarafina felt ridiculous for a second, then she thought about it. "If my community was dying around me, I'd find comfort in my routines." She had no funding for her research project on killie evolution.

"As I do," the lieutenant said. He smiled slightly. "I arrest smugglers." Sarafina hoped he would confiscate the fish and let her go on to America, perhaps with a fine. She smiled back at him. He said, "Why did you attack the customs agents? Are we missing something? A microdot? A computer virus on a small strip of metallic tape? Or a vial of Ebola?"

Sarafina expected more beatings. Or she'd disappear forever into an African prison. She had attacked like a cornered animal because she was, after all, in Africa. But now this lieutenant seemed civilized and suspicious along technological lines. She suspected he'd be more upset if she offered him a bribe than any African in her imagination. "I was afraid they'd kill my fish."

"You stole the fish. We're confiscating your reverse osmosis filter. My wife will be happy to have it. We'll have clean water without burning fuel."

Sarafina said, "I would be happy to ship some over to your men, too, if you like." She saw the lieutenant's face shift, the smile gone, semiotics of skin and muscle unreadable. *But you lived in England*, she wanted to tell him. *You speak English, you must think like I do.* But he said something

in an African language, muttered thoughts sprung from a different cognitive thicket. She asked, "What do you want?"

"I have a wager with my men. They don't believe that you'd fuck as well as fight for your fish. I said that they are your passion, and you will."

Sarafina asked, "Do you have any diseases?" She shocked herself. But she was responsible for keeping the fish alive once she'd netted them.

"I will let you take all your fish back to America for this."

"The fish aren't that valuable," Sarafina said.

"We could bust you for trafficking in endangered species. I could be promoted. Gabon will improve its reputation with French and German Greens."

"You'll give me the fish if I sleep with you?"

"We Africans can be such liars. But what choice do you have?"

Sarafina said, "Do they want to watch?"

"Pubic hair would suffice."

"I could just snip it off."

The skin and face muscles shifted into something that looked like a smile again. "No."

"Why not?"

"The passions of Europeans are most curious."

"It's an odd proposition."

"Do you want to see your fish? Before you cooperate with me."

Sarafina thought that would give her time. "Yes." Postpone this, refuse if the fish are dead.

The smile cut deeper into the lieutenant's face. "Very good. You're entertaining the notion." The accent here seemed subtly different, as though he were quoting an American he might have propositioned in such a manner over some other sort of smuggling.

When Sarafina rose from the metal chair, she felt more battered than she had when the border guards had first thrust her into the lieutenant's office. The bruised muscles seemed to have glued themselves into cramped positions. She knew that her face was dirty, and could feel the blood crusted around her nose. *I need to see if my nose is broken.*

The lieutenant walked Sarafina through the modernistic airport, filled with fruit vendors and weavers selling *kente* cloth to African Americans, then outside to a long cinder block building covered with galvanized steel. The roof had been painted lumpy with many coats of silver paint. Two soldiers guarded the entrance, but smiled and stepped aside when they saw the lieutenant. He unlocked the door and snapped on an electric light. The *Aphyosemion ogoense pyrophore* in the plastic shipping bags seemed heat-stressed, gills flaring as they hung at the water surface. But alive.

"Let's get them back to your office where it's cooler," Sarafina said, wincing at her tone as soon as she spoke, senior lab researcher to glass-

ware washer. She didn't know if she planned to comply to save the fish or to save herself from being even more brutally raped. The sex to come would still be a rape, no matter how much she cooperated, inevitable whether the lieutenant let her and her fish live or not.

"Certainly," the lieutenant said. "And we can change the water. I haven't sent the reverse osmosis filter to my wife yet."

"Doesn't she live in Libreville?"

"I would not have my wife live in a city," he said.

"Not even a European city?"

"Especially not a European city," the lieutenant said.

And she would never spread her legs to save some silly fish seemed to be the subtext. Sarafina said, "Libreville seems more like a European city than I'd expected. Can I wash my face?"

"Yes, we now have air conditioners, fax machines, and criminal gangs without tribal affiliations who control the drug trade. Don't you want to help your fish first?"

"Your crew must have thought they'd caught a drug smuggler at first when they found the bags in my luggage. Were they disappointed?"

"No, they thought you were a drug smuggler when you attacked them. Can I help you change the water on your fish?"

Sarafina knew he wanted her to quit stalling. Her hands trembled as she filled the R/O tank, pressurized it. "It will take a while for the water to come through." She checked the fish again. They seemed less sluggish in the air-conditioned room.

"What happens to you in Africa isn't real, is it? You will go home, and our bush life will be a colorful part of your African adventure that our progress has contaminated. Did you attack my people because you *wanted* to be beaten? Or because Africa is hot colors, passion, and corrupt police?"

He was embarrassingly right. "I didn't want anything to happen to my fish. You can keep all the money I have. Just let me keep fifty dollars to pay for the cab from the airport."

The lieutenant found her purse among the items that his men had brought in, opened her wallet and pulled out her gold card. "We also have automatic teller machines in Libreville."

"What do you really want? To humiliate an American?"

"Seduce me into letting you keep your fish."

"You won't be satisfied with me just lying down and spreading my legs, will you? I need to wash my face."

"I'll wash your face first, then you will seduce me."

"I thought we'd agreed that if I let you fuck me, you'd let me take the fish back with me."

His English seemed tainted more by skinhead than by any African dialect. "I won't be fooled by a fish whore."

At that, Sarafina knew that she had to kill Thomas when she got

home. But whatever she did to Thomas in the future, if she lived, the lieutenant had absolute power over her *now*. Or was that her fantasy? Perhaps this African lieutenant was merely making sport on a boring day with a silly white woman obsessed with fish too tiny to eat.

"Bring me some liquor," she said.

Unsmiling, he opened his drawer and pulled out a half-filled bottle of a single malt scotch, poured her a large shot in a chipped water glass.

Sarafina said, "That's a cruel abuse of Glenfidditch."

The lieutenant said, "I got it cheap," meaning probably that he'd confiscated it from some tourist too confused to realize he wasn't in an Islamic county and too scared to ask why he was losing his bottle. The lieutenant pulled out a single malt tasting glass, for his own shot. He said, "You think you're special? Fucking a white woman is like fucking plastic-wrapped meat."

"I'm a science researcher," Sarafina said, putting a semiotic distance between herself and all that was coming. She gulped the glass of whiskey, shuddered.

"Pity I don't have access to some of our more exotic drugs. We have one that is reputed to be quite the aphrodisiac." He poured some of the reverse osmosis water on a paper towel and wiped away the blood under her nostrils.

"Yohimbe, I think," Sarafina said when he pulled the towel back. "Is my nose broken?"

"No. Aphrodisiacs are mostly placebo effect," the lieutenant said. He put the bottle and the single malt glass back in the drawer and locked it. He watched her.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"Do you need any of your things?" the lieutenant asked.

"No." Condoms. Sarafina wondered if she dared ask. She could squeeze with her vaginal muscles, fake orgasm.

He followed her to the bathroom at the end of the corridor. His men watched both of them. Sarafina closed the bathroom door, but there was nothing in the bathroom, not a window, not a mirror. He could be lying about her nose not being broken. She thought for a second of drowning herself in the toilet, but that seemed extreme for the situation. She was no virgin, and could fake orgasm with the best of women.

She came out, put her arms around the lieutenant's shoulders, trying to conceal a shudder. *Give him this in front of his men*. He tried to look into her eyes, but she couldn't face him directly.

So they went back to his office. Sarafina kissed and stroked the lieutenant, ground her hips against his thigh, fondled his stiffened cock, and felt less and less aroused. The scotch made her muzzy, not erotic. He stripped her, kicked off his pants, put her down on the floor, and forced her legs wide.

Sarafina felt bludgeoned from the inside. When they were done, she closed her eyes against tears. Water hit her, along with wiggling fish bodies. She opened her eyes and saw the lieutenant, fully dressed again, with an empty fish bag in his hand. He'd poured fish all over her body. Sarafina wondered if the knife he'd used to slit the fish bag would slit her throat next.

"You did not have an orgasm. You lose one bag of fish." Sarafina realized that the lieutenant thought that the sight of fish flopping and dying around a naked woman was funny. She scooped as many of them up in her hands as possible, but the lieutenant popped the other fish underfoot like soft cockroaches.

Sarafina put the two fish she'd grabbed in one of the other bags. "Why not confiscate them and send them back to where I collected them? I took good notes."

"But they're not endangered. You said so yourself."

The phone rang then. The lieutenant answered it, spoke in French, listened, answered back. He grimaced at her, nodded at the phone. Sarafina understood enough to know he'd been called off this perverse teasing before he was finished, and was annoyed. Perhaps he'd intended to rape her again. The lieutenant said, "Get dressed. I can't let you have your fish."

Two men in French suits came in and spoke French to the lieutenant. They pretended not to watch as she got dressed. Sarafina knew that both she and the lieutenant embarrassed them. The two men wrote her a new ticket, through Paris, walked her out of the lieutenant's office and down the long corridor, and put her on the next jet to France. She had no idea if the Gabonese had confiscated all her fish or had found the eggs hidden in plastic tubing that replaced her bras' underwires.

As the plane began its approach to Orly, the steward brought her a hot towel. Sarafina hardly noticed what American customs did to her luggage fourteen hours after Paris. The Gabonese must have been thorough. Nothing was left.

But, in the taxi going home, Sarafina opened a suitcase and felt one of her bras. The lieutenant, for all his experience with the English, had missed the airline tube fake underwiring. Despite all, something might still be saved.

The bruises from the scuffle still hurt, but the surviving fish eggs needed attention first. Sarafina told the taxi driver to take her to the research institute instead.

Thomas, standing in the lobby as though he was waiting for someone, saw her enter. Sarafina noticed that he looked surprised.

Sarafina stared at him until he looked away. *I almost died for these fish*, Sarafina thought. He looked surprised to see her, but not surprised by her battered and disheveled appearance. *Perhaps he got a fax from Gabon.*

Sarafina pushed her bags onto the elevator and decided that she would have been able to deal with him more quickly if all the fish eggs in the tubes had died. But she'd deal with him eventually, regardless. The elevator doors closed.

In the basement, Sarafina lifted the egg-filled tubes to eye level and checked to see what she'd lost to bacteria and fungus. Some eggs were marble white, dead, fungus threads growing into the eggs up the tube from them. Twenty-four tubes—going into Gabon, Customs had suspected Sarafina of planning to sell the bras, but they were all her size. When the customs agent asked, "Why do you have so much underwear?" Sarafina had said, "Because I'm a woman." Had the customs men been more familiar with that particular brand of bra, they might have felt the airline tubing where underwire should be.

Or had Customs let her bras pass, knowing they'd catch her coming back with the fish?

Now, she snipped the plugged ends off the first tube, put the eggs in a hatching dish, then pipetted out the bad egg. Out of all twenty-four tubes, Sarafina harvested fifteen good eggs, the embryonic eyes showing through the cell membranes already. Two tubes had only dead eggs in them, so she didn't snip them open. Sarafina put all the empty tubes, the two with dead eggs, and the fungused eggs in a container for hazardous waste. African bio material, even with acraflavin added—well, one never knew. The institute's waste handlers would incinerate the water and fungused eggs.

Theme and variation, and unstable genes. Sarafina could still do species maintenance.

The fax beeped in the lab. Sarafina retrieved the fax from the computer. Two fish pressing against each other came out digitized, *Aphyosemion ogoense pyrophore* mating against artificial grass, a stock German shot. No cover sheet. Sarafina knew that the lieutenant had sent the photo.

Or had Thomas sent it from the top floor?

Twelve days later, when the fish eggs hatched, Sarafina faxed a macrophoto of the fish to both Thomas and the customs house in Libreville. She passed Thomas in the cafeteria the next day. He stared at her as though he knew both what the fry were and where they'd come from. Sarafina would never tell anyone how she'd gotten the eggs across the borders.

Three weeks later, Sarafina vomited as soon as she woke up, and thought for a terrible hour that the lieutenant had impregnated her. She noted that the vomitus wasn't bloody, flushed the toilet, and went to her drugstore for a pregnancy test. The test was negative.

A virus. Viruses filled the world. Organelles in her cells were parasites that adapted perfectly. Every multi-celled organism was part colony. Sarafina remembered hearing the fish pop under the lieutenant's feet.

Sarafina vomited for three days and stopped before she went to her

HMO. She was afraid to ask for an AIDS test there, so went down to a confidential clinic and paid in cash.

No AIDS.

Months later, she faxed both Thomas and the Libreville customs people photos of the Gabonese *ogoense* breeding. She'd been at a conference for human genome project workers in Washington then, and thought about going to the Gabonese consulate to see if she could find out who the lieutenant was and try to make trouble for him. But she'd just sent the fax the day before. Could the Gabonese arrest her in their consulate for smuggling she'd done months earlier? She knew that she was verging on crazy behavior that wasn't even particularly smart.

Back at her lab was a new photo fax, in color, of a new *ogoense*, perhaps a new species, perhaps not an *ogoense* at all. A black hand cupped it against the photo tank glass to hold it in focus.

Sarafina took the elevator up to Thomas's office and asked, "Why did you fax my photo to the Gabonese?"

"I didn't send your photograph to the Gabonese," Thomas said calmly.

"I saw the fax."

"Faxes can be faked. Letterhead can be stolen."

Sarafina said, "How would they know what letterhead to fake? Whose signature to forge?"

Thomas just looked at her from behind his desk, his beard trembling slightly. "They aren't savages. They read journals."

"Why would they do that? How would they *know* I smuggle out fish?" Sarafina was outraged that Thomas could try to shift the moral ground so. He was a liar. She'd only told him about her fish-collecting trips because she thought he'd sympathize. She added, "The man who arrested me killed the fish."

"You killed the fish. Why didn't you apply for a proper export permit?"

"All the subspecies haven't been identified. I'm not a certified ichthyologist."

"Right. You've been hired as a technician for the Human Genome Project."

"You weren't hired to inform for Gabonese customs!"

"I said it was faked. Did you bring a copy back with you?"

Sarafina knew where this would go. She almost told Thomas that he'd gotten her raped, but realized that she couldn't prove that either. All the evidence was back in Africa. "I got some fish out anyway."

"An environmentally destructive hobby."

"Not at all. We give ornamental fish-exporting nations a reason to leave forest strips around rivers."

"Fish collecting is a by-product of the logging industry. Fish started coming from the Rio Xingu only after the logging crews arrived. The environment is raped when the fish come out of it."

"Thomas, the man who arrested me said that we don't see the world outside the United States as real. I don't think you see the world outside your head as real."

"Too many humans to get concerned over one. And you're being hysterical. I'm asking you to leave. Now."

Sarafina knew that the Director of Environmental Education had more clout than she did, not because he helped the private sector, but because he was some industrialist's son. "The man who arrested me did show me your fax," she said as she stood up.

"He must have been suspicious of your earlier border crossings and faked a fax from me. The Gabonese have been manipulating the French and the World Bank for decades. Why not manipulate us, too? You *are* leaving now, aren't you?"

Sarafina nodded, and took the elevator back down to her fish. For the rest of the day, she picked eggs off the spawning mops, rinsed them in clean water, and put them in petri dishes to incubate at room temperature. Finally calm, she pulled out a meal cake saved from her last hideous field trip and ate the stale thing, then washed the taste away with reverse osmosis water, totally demineralized. She needed another field R/O unit before she went back to Africa. She'd go to Zaire this time, find someone who could tell her about the Gabonese lieutenant. The men who'd escorted her to the plane hadn't approved of the lieutenant. He'd taken advantage of a situation. If she'd only have protested then. Oh well, she hadn't, too much shock.

Before Sarafina could get her visa, the research institute transferred her to the L-4 biohazard unit. She lost her vacation time. Others had unraveled the secrets of the DNA she'd been working on. Her supervisor, who'd left her to her work for years, said, "We need someone who knows how to handle bio material precisely. You know the drill."

Congress approved biohazard projects without knowing precisely *how* the material was shuffled between labs to justify the grants. Sarafina knew that vast collections of Hantavirus Giles County and Gardiner's Island, Ebola Reston and Ebola Zaire, and various strains of AIDS and staphylococcus, moved in secure bottle trucks between the remaining universities and the new research institutes to justify these grants. Turning the bacteria and viruses loose would harm the private sector, so keeping them contained and studied helped it. Sarafina saw it as a larger-scale and twisted version of the extortion the lieutenant had practiced on her.

"I know the drill," Sarafina said. Nobody could be nuts enough to turn loose those lethal protein crystals, those tiny fungi kin.

"We'll need you to move your fish, since you won't be using this lab anymore. We'll give you the tank stands if you don't have stands at your apartment."

"I can't control the temperature where I live," Sarafina said. She had one room in a technicians' building.

"We need the space."

Thomas was taking her space. Human overpopulation had robbed her of a Ph.D., was paving her fish's water shed, and was now pushing her arked species out of the two closets where she'd kept them. She couldn't both go to Africa on her vacations *and* rent a larger apartment.

"Give me a few days."

Her supervisor nodded. Sarafina locked herself in the warmer closet and cried for her fish, for her lost Ph.D. She wondered, *I have so little. How can they take away what little I have and put me in a L-4 unit?*

She called friends in the American Killie Association and found homes in Oregon, Washington State, and Colorado for the cold-water variants, then shipped them using her savings money, days out of her postponed vacation. The warmth-tolerant fish she squeezed into her apartment.

I doubt I could have collected any more without permits in any case. I'm probably on the list of fish smugglers. Or, if the lieutenant's treatment of her had overly embarrassed the suited men who'd escorted her onto the plane, maybe she *wasn't* on the list. No, she couldn't trust that. She had to live as though she was on the bio-smugglers list.

Years before, when Sarafina had been in graduate school, a house painter who wrote poetry between gigs told her that scientists would end up as marginal as artists. "No, we can always make bombs," Sarafina had told that cynical older woman.

Why should we train Ph.D.'s the economy can't absorb? Isn't tenure just another form of welfare?

Going into the L-4 lab was like living through the horrors of Africa without the pleasures, isolated not by language but by the suits, the air hoses, the monkeys howling in their cages. Each virus had its own genome project—short viral genetic material unraveled, sometimes re-built, injected into tissue cultures or live animals to see if the gene tweak affected the virulence.

As research jobs went, L-4 lab work was secure. Sarafina found the daily protocol in her box each morning. She never went into the unit alone. After showers, gloves, suits, helmets, sweat and claustrophobia, Sarafina found herself reduced to a mammal in a transport bag, her partner reduced to eyes and a voice. Each day unwound in distorted reverse: showering in the suit, then stripping off the helmet and suit, take another shower, take off the gloves, take another shower. Air blowers dried her. After she got home, Sarafina felt as though she'd disembarked from a long airplane ride: dehydrated, tired from holding her body in fixed positions. In a plane, she could move her arms freely at least. But in the L-4 lab, each movement had to be considered. Sharps, partners, monkeys, proprioceptors in the muscles at the body's rim the brain's constant focus.

And the monkeys, unless they were too sick, threw shit at her. On injection days, Sarafina found she had additional partners. She never knew from one day to the next precisely which L-4 lab she'd be in, what she'd be doing: Security.

At night, Sarafina fed her fish, changed the water, pipetted out dead eggs, fed brine shrimp. She called the people who'd taken her surplus populations, found that few people were quite as obsessed with *Aphyosemion ogoense* as she was.

Thomas was responsible for exterminating the lines other aquarists lost.

Confront the problem directly, Sarafina decided. She'd apply for a Gabonese fish collecting permit, do it legally this time. If she was on a fish smuggling list, they'd turn her down. Or they'd turn her down because they didn't want eco-tourists checking out the logging damage. But still, she wanted to go back to Gabon, collect where she'd collected in the past, before the lieutenant.

The officials at the embassy told her that, as an amateur, she'd need to book with a fish collection group tour. Her fish would be exported under the expedition's license.

Both the British Killie Association and the German killie club publications advertised tours into Gabon. On-line in the killie area, Sarafina learned that the expedition firm, run by German and American Greens, watched its charges quite carefully.

But Sarafina couldn't afford the trip this year. So she spent her vacation working with the *ogoense* variations she *did* have: tying new spawning mops around cork floats, sterilizing egg containers, selecting new broodstock, rebuilding her air-compressor, boiling peat moss.

The L-4 lab was twice as terrible when she came back. Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta sent the institute samples of hantavirus Gardiner's Island and cages of grey squirrels. Hantaviruses had been a surprise back in the 1990s, when they killed over thirty people in the West, one boy on Gardiner's Island off Long Island, and half-killed an Australian hiker who'd picked up the virus somewhere along the Appalachian Trail between Springer Mountain, Georgia, and Chambersberg, Pennsylvania, where he showed up with damaged lungs and kidneys. Trip of a lifetime, doing the whole Appalachian Trail: *not this year, sucker, but you will make medical history*. CDC personnel in moonsuits trapped deer mice and astonished late-season hikers during the winter, but failed that year to isolate the particular virus. Of approximately two hundred biologists who'd worked for years with small rodents, only one turned up positive for hantavirus.

CDC did, however, get a good supply of Gardiner's Island. The perpetual project was testing Gardiner's Island on new hosts to see if it evolved

rapidly, as did the AIDS virus, or if it was relatively stable. CDC investigators in the 1990s had found hantavirus in a wide variety of mammals, from urban mice to squirrels, circumpolar, Asia, America, Europe. It was an old virus, generally sub-lethal. Possibly, hantavirus had caused the past's obscure diseases: galloping consumption, idiopathic kidney failure.

Gardiner's Island killed once while the Centers for Disease Control were watching for hanta. It now replicated in lab animals.

Sarafina wondered if the Australian had taken hantavirus back with him, and if it would adapt to marsupials as well as the exotic rodents who'd smuggled themselves in with the humans. Or had the marsupials been a firebreak for hanta in Australia? She wondered if an L-4 technician should research her materials, but that joy got stomped well before her smuggled fish.

But if it showed up in *Thomas* . . . well, hantavirus wasn't an exotic, was it? She'd let Africa and those suited men take care of the lieutenant.

"Do you think we can possibly stay sane working in these conditions?" her trainee asked her as they left the decontamination showers.

"At least squirrels don't throw shit," Sarafina said, preoccupied. She was trying to think of a way to get the hantavirus out of the lab without infecting herself.

Two weeks later, the squirrels began dying. Sarafina knew that would be no guarantee that the virus would be as lethal to Thomas. She wondered why, if he was such a Green, he hadn't called the animal rights people down on the lab.

He must be a hypocrite.

Sleight of hand. Syringe of squirrel sputum into tubing between two layers of glove, then she sealed the tubing in another tube. Her trainee didn't know enough about procedures to question what she was doing. Then into her left ear through the showers.

For a horrible moment, Sarafina wondered how she could return the virus-riddled sputum to the L-4 lab. *This is insane.* But the Centers for Disease Control should know if hantavirus Gardiner's Island was as lethal as the Arizona strain.

She decided that Thomas would probably live through it. The weeks of isolation in the CDC danger ward would be punishment enough. *If hanta spread like crazy, we'd all be dead by now.* She should have collected urine and blood, too. But how would she infect him? She put the tube of hanta-contaminated materials in her freezer over the frozen fish food and sat watching a scenario generate itself in her brain.

Once upon a time, I used to be an intelligent, goal-oriented woman, but the Universe doesn't support teleology. Sarafina thought about attacking Thomas in the cafeteria. In the confusion, she could squeeze the squirrel matter into his food. She visualized him eating like a shocked automaton as security guards dragged her off.

Relief. They'll never put me back in the L-4 lab if I do something so crazy.

But Sarafina knew that her scenario would go sour. The guards would call Sarafina's HMO and wait for the psychiatric team to show up with psychotropic drugs and restraints.

She could tell them, "I used to be a Ph.D. candidate."

Then the psych team member holding the needle in his hand would look at the guards, as though they'd know if Sarafina was delusional or not.

Perhaps, she hoped, they'll give me crazy checks and let me live alone with my fish. Of course, they'd never tell her what happened to Thomas.

No, that's too crazy. Sarafina wanted to *know* what happened to Thomas.

A week later, Sarafina found a squirrel's nest out on the institute's campus. She thawed the tube of virus matter in her gloved hands and injected one baby squirrel. She took it up to Thomas, saying, "It fell out of the nest. Can you help it?"

Thomas said, "Do you know where the nest is?"

"On the grounds, but I don't know what one. Why don't you raise it yourself?"

Thomas looked at her as though he wondered if she'd smuggled it from the diseased squirrel colony in the L-4 lab, but she and he both knew that was impossible. She put the squirrel baby in Thomas's bare hands. It wiggled, looking for a teat.

In three weeks, Sarafina's lungs began to go, but Thomas was sick, too. She went to her HMO, but as soon as she tested positive for hanta, the HMO shipped her to the L-4 isolation facility. Thomas came in two days later, looking sick and old, but still mobile. He said through the intercom between units, "Why?"

"You got me raped." Her breath rasped as she struggled for enough of it to talk. "You killed my fish."

"I put the squirrel back in its nest," Thomas said. "Thousands of people have come down with hanta. CDC is torching everything mammalian for miles. They've finally got their Big One."

"Didn't mean for you to do that," Sarafina said. The hanta strain must have been more virulent than anyone had thought. Her death would kill her remaining fish. How many other creatures would die? Maybe the disease would spread all the way around the world to Africa, and kill her jesting lieutenant too.

Thomas said, "Pity about the other squirrels. But a major die-back for humans wouldn't be that bad." He coughed wetly, blood flecking his lips. "Hope I live to see it."

Wish, Sarafina wanted to say. But she no longer had the breath. ●

NEXT ISSUE

SPECIAL HOLIDAY TREAT

Well, it's Christmastime again (in the world of Magazine Publishing, anyway, even though it's June as I'm actually typing these words), and so, in keeping with long tradition, we'll be bringing you a Christmas story next issue—in fact, we'll be bringing you two of them! First up, multiple Nebula and Hugo-winner **Connie Willis**, who's won more awards than anyone else in the history of science fiction, shows us the kinds of interesting and highly unusual things you might—or might not!—want to write about in your annual holiday "Newsletter." Then Hugo-winner **Janet Kagan**, author of the popular "Mama Jason" series, returns after too long an absence with a recipe for the kind of adjustments to the mind and heart you have to perform if you want to keep "Standing in the Spirit" this holiday season, in spite of snarling packs of holiday shoppers, rampant commercialism and greed, and sneering Scrooge wannabes with a Bah Humbug! always ready on their lips.

Don't worry, though—if you have a bit of Scrooge in your own makeup, the rest of our December issue turns away from seasonal concerns to take us into the far future, and clear across the galaxy to strange new alien worlds.

BIG-NAME WRITERS

Nebula-winner **Michael Swanwick**, one of our most popular authors, takes us to a bizarre far-future to learn the bitter price you must pay if you want to learn "The Wisdom of Old Earth"; multiple Nebula and Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick**, author of the renowned "Kirinyaga" series, gives us a glimpse of the Glory That Was on a distant alien world, as he takes us on a guided tour through the ruins of "The 43 Antarean Dynasties"; Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Howard Waldrop** plunges us headlong into the weird, wild, and wonderful world of Masked Mexican Wrestlers, and treats us to ringside seats at a fight that could determine the destiny of the world, as we visit "El Castillo de la Perseverancia"; **Rob Chilson** sweeps us along with a man on the run from Fate, in a suspenseful game of cat-and-mouse that answers the question, "Do We Dare Disturb the Universe?"; and new writer **B.J. Thrower**, making an evocative *Asimov's* debut, shows us a young boy's mystic journey toward wisdom and manhood, with magical forces and strange powers in opposition every step of the way, in "Noodle You, Noodle Me."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us along on "The Case of the Radioactive Goat Cheese"; and Paul Di Filippo brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features.

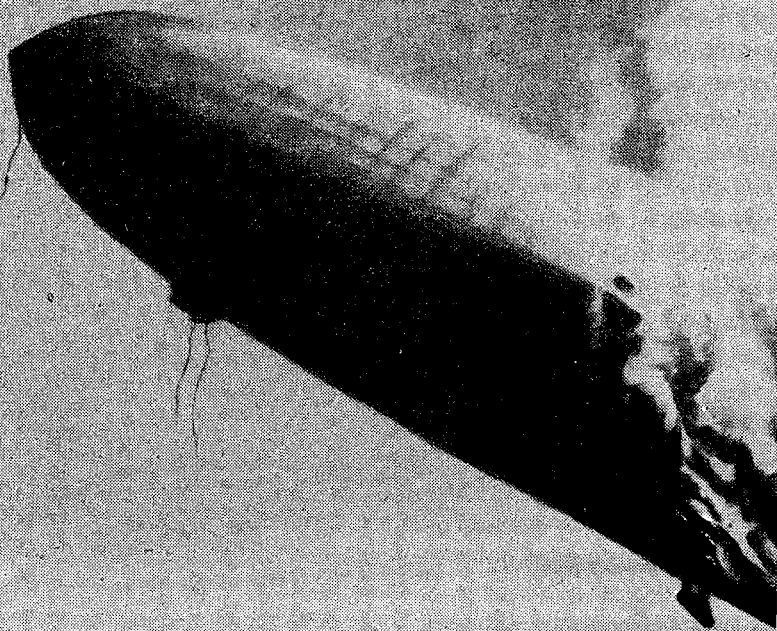
Look for our December Special Holiday Issue on sale on your newsstand on October 14, 1997, or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic issues we have coming up for you next year!

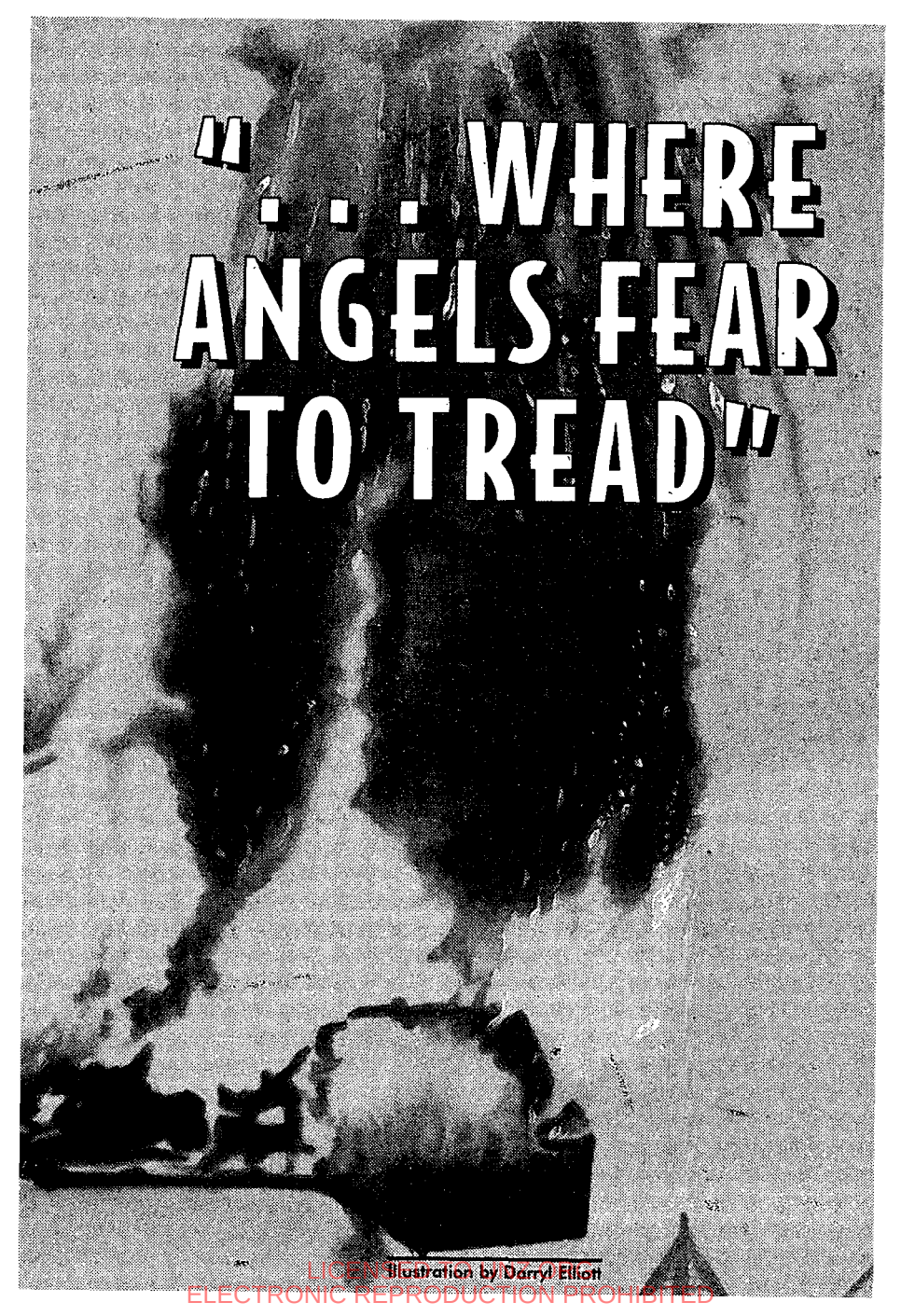
COMING SOON

Exciting new stories by **Greg Egan**, **Geoffrey A. Landis**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Robert Reed**, **Walter Jon Williams**, **L. Timmel Duchamp**, **Howard Waldrop**, and others.

Allen Steele

The author's latest novel, *A King of Infinite Space*, is just out from HarperPrism. His most recent story for us, "The Death of Captain Future" (October 1995), won the 1996 Hugo award for Best Novella, and was a finalist for the Nebula award. Mr. Steele was born in Nashville, Tennessee, and spent summers on the same lake where much of the drama in the following fast-paced and careering adventure story occurs. In this breathtaking tale he deftly shows us why there truly are times and places . . .





**"... WHERE
ANGELS FEAR
TO TREAD"**

LICENSING Illustration by Darryl Elliott

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

W *Thursday, January 15, 1998: 11:12 P.M.*

hen the Center Hill Lake affair was over, after reports were filed with the appropriate agencies and various subcommittees had held closed-door hearings, when everyone with proper clearance had been reassured that the situation, although not completely resolved, at least was no longer critical . . . only then, looking back on the course of events, did Murphy come to realize that it really started the night before, in the Bullfinch on Pennsylvania Avenue.

The Bullfinch was a venerable Capitol Hill watering hole, located about three blocks from the Rayburn Building in one direction and within walking distance of one of Washington's more crime-ridden neighborhoods in the other. It was a favorite lunch spot for Congressional aides and journalists invaded it during happy hour, but by evening it became the after-hours hangout of federal employees from a dozen different departments and agencies. Coming off twelve-hour workdays, their shirts stained with sweat, their guts full of junk food, they emerged from Commerce and Agriculture and Justice and made their way to the Bullfinch for a few rounds with the boys before stumbling to Capitol South station to catch the next Metro out to the Maryland and Virginia suburbs.

Thursday was beer night for the Office of Paranormal Sciences. Murphy skipped these bull sessions more often than not, preferring to spend his evenings at home in Arlington with his wife and son. Donna was still mourning her mother's death just before Christmas, though, and Steve seemed to be more interested these days in Magic cards than his father, so when Harry Cumisky tapped on his door shortly after eight and asked if he wanted to grab a couple of brewskis with the boys, Murphy decided to go along. It had been a long time since he had given himself a break; if he came home an hour late with Budweiser on his breath, then so be it. Donna would burrow into her side of the bed anyway, and Steven wouldn't care so long as Dad took him to the comics shop on Saturday.

So he shut down the computer, locked up his office, and joined Harry and Kent Morris on a five-block trudge through sleet and slush to the Bullfinch. They were the last of the OPS regulars to arrive; several tables had already been pushed together in the back room, and an overworked waitress had already set the group up with pitchers of beer and bowls of popcorn. Although everyone was mildly surprised to see him, they quickly made room at the table. Murphy was aware of his button-down rep; he loosened his tie, admonished a wide-eyed Yale intern to stop addressing him as Sir and call him Zack instead, and poured the first of what he initially promised himself would be only two beers. A couple of drinks with the gang, a few laughs, then he would head home.

But that was not to be. It was a cold, damp night, and he was in a warm, dry bar. Gas flames hissed beneath fake logs in the nearby hearth, and firelight reflected off the panes of framed sports photos on the wood-

paneled walls. Conversation was light, ranging from next week's Super Bowl to current movies to the latest Hill gossip. The waitress's name was Cindy, and although she wore an engagement ring, she seemed to enjoy flirting with the OPS guys. Every time his mug was half-empty, Kent or Harry or someone else would quickly top it off. After his second trip to the john, Zack stepped into a phone booth and called home to tell Donna not to wait up for him. No, he wasn't drunk; just a little tired, that's all. No, he wouldn't drive; he'd leave his car in the garage and take a cab. Yes, dear. No, dear. I love you, too. Sweet dreams, goodnight. And then he sailed back to the table, where Orson was regaling Cindy with the joke about the Texas senator, the prostitute, and the longhorn steer.

Before he realized it, the hour was late and the barroom was half-empty. One by one, the chairs had been vacated as the boys polished off their drinks, shrugged into their parkas and overcoats, and moseyed back out into the clammy night. Where there had once been nearly a dozen, now there were only three—Kent, Harry, and himself—teetering on that uncertain precipice between insobriety and inarticulate stupor. Cindy had long since ceased being amused and was now merely disgusted; she cleared away the empty mugs, delivered a pitcher that she firmly told them would be their last, and asked who needed a cab. Murphy managed to tell her that, yes ma'am, a cab would be a mighty fine idea, thank you very much, before he returned to the discussion at hand. Which, coincidentally enough, happened to be time travel.

Perhaps it wasn't so odd. Although time travel was a subject usually addressed in the more obscure books on theoretical physics, OPS people were acutely interested in the bizarre; they had to be, for that was the nature of their business. So it didn't seem strange that Murphy would find himself discussing something like this with Kent and Harry; it was late, they were drunk, and that was all there was to it.

"So imagine . . ." Harry belched into his fist. "Scuse me, sorry . . . well, imagine if time travel was possible. I mean, let's say it's possible to go past to th' past, y'know . . ."

"You can't do it," Kent said flatly.

"Sure, sure, I know." Harry waved his hand back and forth. "I know it can't be done, I know that, okay? But let's jus' pretend. . ."

"You can't do it, I'm tellin' ya. It can't be done. I've read th' same books, too, y'know, and I'm tellin' ya it's impossible. Nobody can do it. Nobody has the technology. . ."

"I'm not talkin' 'bout *now*, dammit. I'm talkin' 'bout sometime in th' *future*. Couple'a hundred, thousand years from now, thass what I'm . . . that's what I'm tryin' to get at, y'know."

"Somebody from the future, coming back here for a visit. That it?" Murphy had read a lot of science fiction when he was a kid, and time travel was a big subject in those stories. He even had a few beat-up old

Ace Doubles stashed away in his attic, although he'd never admit that to these guys. Science fiction wasn't well-respected at OPS, unless it was *The X-Files*.

"Thass it," Harry nodded vigorously. "Thass what I'm talkin' 'bout. Somebody from the future comin' back here for a visit."

"Can't be done," Kent insisted. "Not in a hundred million years."

"Yeah, well, maybe not," Murphy said, "but just for the sake of argument, okay. Le's pretend someone from the future . . ."

"Not just someone." Harry reached for the half-empty pitcher, sloshed some more beer into his mug. "A lotta someones . . . a lot of people, comin' back from the . . . y'know, the future."

"Yeah, right, okay." Kent eyed the pitcher with avarice; as soon as Harry put it down, he picked it up and poured much of the rest into his own mug, leaving a half-inch at the bottom of the pitcher. "Simon sez le's pretend. So where are they?"

"Tha's it. Tha's th' point. Tha's what summa the phizachists . . . phiz-zakists . . ."

"Physicists," Murphy said. "What I am. I yam what I yam, and that's all that I . . ."

Harry ignored him. "If you can go back in time in th' future, come back to here . . ." He jabbed a finger against the table. ". . . then where *are* they? That's what one of the Brits . . . the guy in the wheelchair, whas-sisname . . ."

"Hawking."

"Right, Hawking. Anyway, that's what he says . . . if time travel is possible, then where're the time travelers?"

"Yeah, but didn't somebody say that about aliens?" Kent raised an eyebrow; for an instant, he almost looked sober again. "That other guy . . . whatchamacallit, the Italian, Fermi . . . once said the same thing about aliens. Luggit what we do now . . . look for aliens!"

Murphy was about to add that, out of all the UFO sightings and abductions he had investigated in ten years with the OPS, he had yet to find one which panned out in terms of hard evidence. He had interviewed dozens of people who claimed to have been taken aboard extraterrestrial spacecraft and collected enough out-of-focus photos of disc-shaped objects to fill a file cabinet, yet after a decade of government service, he had never found an alien or an alien spacecraft. He let it pass, though; this was not the time nor place to be questioning his agency's mission or methods, nor were these the people to whom he should be expressing his doubts.

"Not th' same thing, man. Not th' same thing." Although there was still some beer left in his mug, Harry reached for the pitcher, but Kent snagged it first. "If'n there was time travelers, they'd sway . . . stay hidden. Nobody would know they were there. They'd do it for their own good. Right?"

Kent barked laughter as he poured the last dregs into his mug. "Yeah, sure. Like we got people from th' future all 'round us now . . ."

"Well, shit, we *might*." Harry turned toward some guys seated nearby. "Hey, any of you fuggers from the future?"

They glared at him, but said nothing. Cindy was wiping tables and putting up chairs; she shot them a dark look. It was getting close to last call; she didn't seem to be happy to have garrulous drunks harassing her last remaining customers. "You wanna cool it?" Kent murmured. "Geez, I didn't meanta make it a federal case . . ."

"Hey, it is a federal case, man! Thass what we *do*, izzn't it? I say we bust this place for acceptin' time-travelers withoutta . . . withoutta . . . fuck, I dunno, a green card?"

Harry reached into his suit pocket, pulled out his badge holder with the OPS seal engraved on its leatherette cover, started to push back his chair. That was enough for Murphy; he grabbed Harry's wrist before he could stand up. "Hey, hey, take it easy. . . ."

Harry started to pull his hand free, but Murphy hung on. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cindy giving the bartender a discreet hand signal; they were about a second away from being thrown out. "Calm down," he murmured. "Keep this up and we're going to land in jail."

Harry glowered at him, and for a moment Murphy wondered if he was going to throw a punch. Then he grinned and dropped back into his chair. The badge folder slipped from his hand and fell onto the table. "Shit, man . . . I was just kidding, thass all. Jus' makin' a point, y'know."

"Yeah, that's right." Murphy relaxed, pulled his hand away. "I know. You're just kidding."

"Thass right. Y'know an' I know . . . ain' no such thing as . . . geez, whatchamacallit . . ."

"I know, I know. We got the point. . . ."

And that was it. Murphy hung around long enough to make sure that Harry had a cab ride and that he wouldn't cause any more trouble, then he pulled on his parka and headed for the door, pausing at the bar to guiltily slip a five-spot into Cindy's tip glass. The sidewalk was empty; the night frigid and silent. Pale exhaust fumes from the waiting taxi lingered above the curb like pallid ghosts; he climbed in, gave the driver directions to his place in Arlington, then settled back against the duct-taped seat and gazed out the frosted windows as they passed the floodlighted dome of the Capitol building.

Time travel. Jesus. What a stupid idea.

Thursday, May 6, 1937: 7:04 P.M.

The leviathan descended from the slate-gray sky. At first it was a silver ovoid, but as it turned northeast, it gradually expanded in size and shape, taking on the dimensions of a vast pumpkin seed. As the drone of

its four diesel engines reached the crowd gathered in the New Jersey meadow. Navy seamen in white caps jogged toward an iron mooring mast positioned in the center of the landing field. Everyone else stared up at the behemoth as it cruised six hundred feet overhead, its great shadow passing across their faces as it began making a sharp turn to the west. Now they could clearly see the swastikas on its vertical stabilizers, the Olympic rings on the fuselage above the passenger windows, and—above its control gondola, just aft of its blunt prow, painted in enormous Gothic letters—the giant's name.

Within the airship, passengers stood at tilted cellon windows on A Deck's promenade, watching as the *Hindenberg* made its final approach to Lakehurst Naval Air Station. They were arriving thirteen hours late, due to high headwinds over the Atlantic and an additional delay while a thunderstorm swept out to sea, but few people cared; during the last few hours, they had gazed down upon the spire of the Empire State Building, caused a Dodgers game to grind to a halt as they passed over Ebbets Field, and watched whitecaps breaking on the Jersey shore. Stewards had already carried their baggage to the gangway stairs aft of the state-rooms, where it now lay piled beneath the bronze bust of Marshal von Hindenberg. It had been a wonderful trip: three days aboard the world's largest and most glamorous airship, a flying hotel where mornings began with breakfast in the dining room and evenings ended with brandy and cigars in the smoking room.

Now the voyage was over, though, and everyone wanted to get their feet on the ground again. For the Americans, it was homecoming; in a few minutes, they'd be reunited with family and friends waiting for them at the aerodrome. For the sixty-one crew members, it was the *Hindenberg's* seventh flight to the United States, the first this year. For a couple of German Jews, it was escape from the harsh regime that had taken control of their native country. For three Luftwaffe intelligence officers posing as tourists, it was a temporary layover in a decadent nation of mongrels.

For the passengers listed on the manifest as John and Emma Pannes, it was the beginning of the final countdown.

Franc Lu raised a hand from the promenade rail to his spectacles, gently tapped their wire frame as if absently adjusting them. A readout appeared on the inside of the right lens: 19:11:31/-13:41(?).

"Thirteen minutes," he murmured.

Lea Oschner said nothing, but gripped the rail a little harder. Around them, passengers were chatting, laughing, pointing at baffled cows in the pastures far below. The airship's faint shadow was larger now, and moving closer; according to history, the *Hindenberg* would drop to 120 meters as it turned eastward again, heading back toward the mooring mast. The passenger decks were soundproof, so they couldn't hear the engines, but Captain Pruss should now be ordering the engines reduced to idle-ahead;

in another minute, they would be reversed to brake the airship for its docking maneuver.

"Relax," he whispered. "Nothing's going to happen yet."

Lea forced a smile, but furtively clasped the back of his hand. Everyone around them was having a wonderful time; it was important that she and Franc appear just as carefree. They were John and Emma Pannes, from Manhasset, Long Island. John Pannes was the Passenger Manager for Hamburg-American German Lloyd Lines, the company that was the American representative for the Zeppelin airship fleet. Emma Pannes, fifteen years younger than her husband, was originally from Illinois. She had followed John's job from Philadelphia to New York, and now they were returning from another business trip to Germany.

Nice, quiet, middle-aged people who wouldn't be at all nervous about being aboard the *Hindenberg* despite the fact that thirteen . . . no, make that twelve . . . minutes from now, they were destined to die.

Yet John and Emma Pannes wouldn't perish in the coming inferno. In fact, they were very much alive, well, and living somewhere in the twenty-fourth century. The CRC advance team had quietly abducted them from their hotel suite at the Frankfurter Hof in the predawn hours of May 3, 1937, and delivered them safely to its safe house outside Frankfurt; by now they should have been picked up by the *Miranda* and transported to A.D. 2314. Franc hoped that the real John Pannes wouldn't object too strongly to being kidnapped; given the alternative, though, he rather doubted that he would, once the facts were explained to him and his wife.

Now Franc was a sixty-year-old American businessman, and Lea was forty-five instead of twenty-nine. Nanoskin and vocodor implants had altered their appearance so convincingly that, two nights earlier, they were able to share a table in the salon with the Pannes' old friend, Ernst Lehmann, the dirigible captain who was aboard the *Hindenberg* to observe Captain Pruss on his first transatlantic flight. They had dinner with Lehmann without the captain noticing any difference, yet they carefully remained aloof during most of the trip, preferring to remain in their cabin. The less interaction they had with the passengers and crew, the less chance of them inadvertently influencing history.

There had been a close moment yesterday, though, when they'd joined a tour of the ship.

The tour was necessary. John and Emma had toured the airship, so they had to follow the course of history. Yet, more importantly, it gave the researchers an opportunity to fulfill the primary objective of their mission: delivering an eyewitness account of the *Hindenberg's* last voyage, and documenting the reason why the LZ 129 had been destroyed. So while the passengers marched single-file along the keel catwalk running, gazing at the vast hydrogen cells within the giant duraluminum rings,

Franc and Lea paused now and then to stick adhesive divots, each no larger than the rivets they resembled, to girders and conduits. They had artfully scattered the divots everywhere aboard the airship; the divots transmitted sights and sounds to the recorders concealed within Franc's cigarette case and Lea's makeup compact, both of which had evaded discovery by the Gestapo agents who inspected everything carried aboard the *Hindenberg* by its passengers before they left the Frankfurter Hof the morning of the flight. Of course, the Nazis had been searching for a bomb, not for surveillance equipment so microscopic that it could be hidden within commonplace items of the early twentieth century.

The incident occurred when the tour reached the airship's stern, just below the place where the bomb was carefully sewn into the canvas liner beneath Cell No. 4. Kurt Ruediger, the ship's doctor who was conducting the tour, had paused to point out the landing-gear well in the lower vertical stabilizer when they heard footfalls descending a ladder above them. A few seconds later, a rigger appeared from the darkness, stepping off the ladder to head forward toward the nose.

When he came into the half-light cast by the electric lamps strung along the catwalk, Franc and Lea recognized him at once: Eric Spehl, whom history would cast as the man who had planted the bomb that would destroy the *Hindenberg*. He didn't look much like a saboteur, although he was within sight of the tiny package he had hidden in the gas cell while the ship was hangared at Friedrichshafen. Indeed, he seemed little more than an overworked rigger: a tall, blond man in drab cotton coveralls and rubber-soled shoes. As the passengers stepped aside to let him pass, though, Lea hesitated on the narrow catwalk. The necklace around her throat held a nanocam; this was her only chance to record Spehl's image.

The heel of her left shoe caught on the aluminum-mesh floor, though, and she tripped and staggered backward, her hands blindly groping for the railing. The airship's taut canvas skin lay only thirty feet below the catwalk; past that was a three hundred meter plummet into the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. Franc reached out to catch her, but Spehl was closer. He grabbed her by the shoulders and steadied her, then he smiled politely and said something about being careful, Fraulein. Then he turned and walked away.

A small occurrence, over and done within a few seconds, yet the significance of such incidents had long been a matter of debate within the Chronospace Research Center. Some researchers argued that world-lines were so rigid that even the slightest disturbance could have vast ramifications; look what had almost happened when the CRC placed someone in a parking lot behind a high fence near Dealey Plaza in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Others contended that chronospace was more flexible than anyone believed; minor accidents were allowable during expeditions

because history was already in motion. It didn't matter how many butterflies one crushed underfoot during the Pleistocene; the dinosaurs would die anyway.

Nonetheless, once Franc and Lea returned to their cabin, they had quietly fretted over whether the incident would cause a paradox. Yet history apparently hadn't been disturbed. Monitoring the airship from their cabin the following morning, as the *Hindenberg* approached the American coast, they watched as Spehl walked down the keel catwalk, furtively looked either way, then climbed the ladder to Cell No. 4. The divot Franc placed at the bottom of the ladder couldn't make him out in the visible spectrum, but his thermographic image showed him clinging to the ladder beneath the cell as he set the photographer's timer that would send an electric current from two dry-cell batteries into a small phosphorous charge.

At 7:25 P.M. local, plus an indeterminate number of seconds, 203,760 cubic meters of hydrogen would be ignited. Thirty-seven seconds later, the *Hindenberg* would hit the ground as 241 tons of flaming mass.

Now the mighty airship was slowing down. Through the promenade windows, they saw the crackerbox shape of the hangar, the skeletal mooring mast surrounded by tiny figures in white caps. Franc tapped his glasses again: 19:17:31/-08.29(?). In a few seconds, the aft water ballast tanks would be released, the bow lines dropped.

It wasn't the next eight minutes that bothered him, though; it was the thirty-seven-plus seconds which would follow the explosion. He and Lea had had little trouble getting aboard the *Hindenberg*. Now they had to see if they could get off again.

Thursday, May 5, 1937: 7:21 P.M.

One of the most interesting things about the early twentieth century, Vasili Metz concluded, was the way Earth looked from space.

It wasn't just the relative smallness of its cities, or the clarity of the skies above them, or the subtle differences of the coastlines. It was surprising to see New York City when its skyline was new and not half-submerged, but even that was to be expected. This was his third mission as the *Oberon's* pilot, and he had become accustomed to such changes. What struck him as unreal was the emptiness of near-Earth space. No power-sats, no colonies, no shuttles. Chronos Station, the CRC's low-orbit port where timeships began and ended their missions, was nowhere to be seen. There wasn't even any space debris; the first satellite wouldn't be launched for forty years, and another thirty years would pass before free-falling junk would pose a navigational hazard.

On the other hand, it would be another twelve years before anyone ever reported having seen a flying saucer. And it would remain that way if he had any say in the matter.

For the past three days, after a brief visit to Earth to drop off Lu and Oschner just outside Frankfurt, then a suborbital jaunt to deposit Tom Hoffman in New Jersey, Metz had held station in geosynchronous orbit above New Jersey. Except for when he monitored the *Miranda's* departure, when it opened the wormhole that would send the support team, plus two nice people named John and Emma Pannes, back to Chronos Station, he had been almost alone.

Three hours earlier, *Oberon* had descended to a new orbit 289 kilometers above New Jersey, and Metz had suddenly become quite busy. Maintaining the proper balance between the timeship's negmass drive and Earth's gravity, while simultaneously compensating for the planet's rotation, was difficult enough; he also had to remain in contact with Hoffman. With no comsats available to assist them, and Tom unable to throw up a transceiver dish, they had to relay on old-fashioned ELF bands that wouldn't likely be intercepted by ham radio operators of this period.

"*Oberon, this is Lakehurst Base.*" Hoffman's voice came over Metz's headset. "*Do you copy? Over.*"

Metz prodded his throat mike. "We copy, Lakehurst. What's the mission status?"

"*Status good. Hindenberg's at the tower. Water ballast down, bow lines have just been dropped. Holding steady at about ninety-one meters. Event minus three minutes, sixteen seconds, and counting.*"

Hoffman was trying to remain professionally detached, but Metz could hear the excitement in his voice. Nor could he blame him; the mission specialist was about to witness one of the classic technodisasters of this century, one which would put an end to commercial airship travel for the next nine decades. It was probably all Tom could do to remain seated within the automobile he had rented a couple of days earlier; however, it wouldn't do for him to be seen lugging a comlink case around the aerodrome.

"Copy that, Lakehurst." A flatscreen below the porthole displayed a false-color radar image of the *Hindenberg* floating above Lakehurst Naval Air Station. The dirigible was a light-blue bullet-shaped blip surrounded by hundreds of tiny white gnats. Above the image was the mission timer: 5.07.37/19.22.05/E-02.45(?). "Holding station, ready for pick-up on your mark."

"Very good, Oberon. I'm about . . ." The rest was lost in a wave of static. Metz's hands moved across his console, correcting the timeship's position; the static cleared and Hoffman's voice came back: ". . . is huge. You wouldn't believe how big it is. Almost the size of an asteroid freighter. It's . . ."

"Keep your mind on the job."

"The motor's running. I'm ready to go." Another pause. "Can you believe people actually used these things to get around? They smell awful."

"I know. Stay focused." Metz glanced at the mission chronometer again. Two minutes, eleven seconds and counting, plus or minus a few seconds due to the inexactness of contemporary records. Those few seconds were going to be the tricky part of this operation.

"All right, Franc," he murmured. "Don't screw up now."

Thursday, May 6, 1937: 7:23 P.M.

An odd stillness had fallen over the airfield. The light drizzle had let up for a moment as dull grey clouds parted here and there, allowing sunlight to lance down upon the aerodrome and reflect greenish twilight off the *Hindenberg's* silver skin. The Navy men had the zeppelin's mooring lines in their hands; they dug in their heels, playing tug-of-war with the leviathan looming three hundred feet above their heads. On the outskirts of the crowd, a radio newsman from Chicago delivered a breathless report of the airship's arrival into a portable dictaphone machine.

Glancing around the promenade, Franc realized that he was surrounded by dead people. Fritz Erdmann, the Luftwaffe colonel who had been trying to ferret out a saboteur among his fellow passengers, but failed to notice Eric Spehl; he would soon be crushed by a flaming girder. Hermann Doehner and his lovely teenage daughter Irene, taking a family vacation to America: they were doomed as well. Moritz Feibusch, the sweet man whom the stewards had segregated from other German passengers simply because he was a Jew; he would soon perish. Edward Douglas, a General Motors businessman the Gestapo believed was an American spy, whom Erdmann had dogged during the entire flight; he, too, was living his last minutes.

And so were John and Emma Pannes. At least, this was how history would record their fate.

Although the clothes he and Lea had put on this morning appeared to be made of contemporary wool and cotton, they were woven from flame-resistant fabrics unknown in this century. The handkerchiefs in their pockets, once unfolded and placed over their mouths, contained two-minute supplies of molecular oxygen. They had left nothing in their baggage which had been made in the twenty-fourth century; the divots they had scattered throughout the airship would dissolve when the ambient air temperature reached 96 Celsius. When no one found their bodies in the wreckage, it would be presumed that their corpses had been incinerated by the inferno. This wasn't too far from the mark; some of the bodies recovered after the disaster had only been identifiable by wedding bands or engraved watches.

"Time," Lea whispered.

Franc prodded his glasses again. "Sixty-five seconds, plus or minus a few." Then he took off the spectacles and slipped them into a vest pocket. She nodded and returned her hand to the railing.

There was a sudden rush of cool air. A few feet down the promenade, someone had cranked open a window. A woman waved to a man with a bulky motion-picture camera on the ground far below. Ghosts. He was surrounded by ghosts.

In the breast pocket of his jacket, Franc carried the one souvenir of this trip he had permitted himself: a folded sheet of paper, engraved with the *Hindenberg's* name and picture, upon which was printed the airship's passenger list. This wasn't for the CRC; when he got home, he would frame it on the wall of his Tycho City apartment. Lea had nagged him about taking it, until he pointed out that it would be destroyed anyway; he later pretended not to notice when she tucked a teaspoon into the garter belt of her stockings. Little things like that wouldn't be missed. He just wished he could save the two caged dogs back in the baggage compartment. Dogs were so scarce where they came from, and he hated to think what would happen to them when . . .

Franc took a deep breath. Calm down, calm down. You're going to get through this. Just don't lose your head now. . . .

They had deliberately placed themselves on the starboard promenade of Deck B, not far from the gangway stairs. Many of the survivors had lived simply because they were here and not on the port promenade of the same deck, where others would be pinned down by dining room furniture. The original John Pannes died because he left the promenade just before the crash to see about Emma, who had remained in their cabin for unknown reasons. Airsickness? A premonition, perhaps? History hadn't recorded the exact reasons why the Pannes had died, but he and Lea wouldn't make the same fatal error.

The airship's stern would hit the ground first. Although the aluminum grand piano at the far end of the promenade worried them, they had already agreed to rush the gangway as soon as they felt that first, fateful jerk that everyone would initially assume to be a mooring rope snapping. Down the stairs past the Deck A landing, then down another flight of stairs to the passenger hatch . . . by the time they got that far, the airship would be almost on the ground. They shouldn't have to jump more than four meters.

Thirty-seven seconds. From the instant when the first flame appeared on the upper aft fuselage to the moment the *Hindenberg* was a flaming skeleton, only thirty-seven seconds would elapse. Time enough to cheat history. . . .

Or time enough to lose the bet.

Franc felt Lea slide against him. "If we don't . . ."

"We will."

Her head nodded against his shoulder. "But if we don't . . ."

"Don't tell me you love me."

Her laughter was nervous and dry. "Stop flattering yourself."

He managed to chuckle, and her hand briefly squeezed his arm before it returned to the railing. Franc glanced to his left, saw the dirigible's shadow gliding closer to the mooring mast. "Hang on . . . any second now. . . ."

The airship drifted back, forward, back again. The ground crew fought the wind as they hauled the behemoth toward the iron tripod. The two ground shadows converged, became as one.

Franc clung to the railing, felt it dig into his palms. Okay, okay . . . when is it going to happen?

A sudden, hard jolt ran through the ship.

He grabbed Lea's shoulders, turned her toward the door heading to the gangway. "Okay, let's go!" he snapped. "Move, move. . . !"

Lea took a step, then stopped. He slammed into her back.

"Wait a minute . . ." she whispered.

"Move!" He shoved at her. "We don't have. . . !"

Then he stopped, and listened.

The deck was stable. It wasn't tilting beneath their feet.

No screams. No shouting. The chairs and tables remained where they were.

Passengers gaped at them with baffled amusement. Edward Douglas chuckled and turned to say something behind his hand to his wife. Moritz Feibusch gave him a look of sympathy. Irene Doehner enjoyed a brief moment of teenage condescension. Colonel Erdmann sneered at him.

Then one of the stewards strolled down the promenade, announcing that the *Hindenberg* had arrived and that all passengers were to make way to gangway stairs. Please do not forget your baggage. Please proceed directly to American customs.

Franc looked down at Lea. Her face was pale; she trembled against him.

"What went wrong?" she whispered.

Friday, January 16, 1998: 8:12 A.M.

Murphy didn't hear the phone when it rang; he was in the bathroom, using a styptic pen on the cuts his razor had made against his chin and neck. Lately he been keeping the razor beneath a little glass pyramid that his wife had given him for Christmas, but it wasn't preserving the blade's sharpness the way its brochure claimed it would. Either that, or the brutal hangover he suffered this morning had made him sloppy while shaving.

At any rate, he wasn't aware that someone was calling for him until Donna knocked on the door. *Office*, she mouthed silently as she extended the cordless to him, and Murphy winced. He was already running late, thanks to the blinding headache he'd awoken with; there must be some eight o'clock meeting he had forgotten, and someone at OPS had phoned to find out what was keeping him. Donna hadn't been pleased when he'd

come home drunk in a cab, and the prospect of having to give him a lift to the office wasn't helping her forgive him. She gave him another withering look as he took the phone, then went back to watching the morning horoscope on TV.

"This is Zack." He tucked the phone under his chin as he reached for the deodorant stick.

"Zack, it's Roger Ordmann . . ."

The phone almost fell into the sink. Roger Ordmann was the agency's Chief Administrator. Murphy had spoken with him exactly three times during his tenure at OPS; the first time was when he had been hired, the other two during social occasions. Roger Ordmann was the man the president called when Mary Lincoln's ghost was seen roaming the second floor of the White House.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Ordmann. Sorry I'm running late, but the car battery died this morning. My wife's about ready to bring me in, though, so . . ."

"That's okay, Dr. Murphy. Perfectly understandable. We have a small problem here that we need to discuss."

The bathroom tiles suddenly felt much colder beneath his bare feet. Oh, God, it's something to do with last night. Harry got in a fight at the bar and was taken downtown. Or Kent cracked up his car while trying to drive home. The police got involved and his name came out. "A problem, sir?"

"Are you on a secure line?"

A moment of puzzlement. What was Ordmann asking? Then he remembered that he was on a cordless phone. "Umm . . . no, sir. Do you want me to . . . ?"

"Please."

"Just a moment, sir . . ." Murphy fumbled with the phone until he found the *Hold* button, then he stalked across the house to the little office next to the den. Donna barely glanced up as he shut the door behind him; the TV volume was up, which meant that she shouldn't be able to hear what he was saying. The forecaster was explaining why this was a good day for Capricorns to renew old friendships, particularly with Scorpions . . .

Murphy sat down at the desk, picked up the hardwired phone, switched off the cordless. "I'm here, sir. Sorry to . . ."

"Is this a secure line?"

What was this? "I'm on another extension, yes sir, if that's what you're asking. I was in the bathroom, speaking on a cordless. Just got out of the . . ." Realizing that he was starting to babble, Murphy stopped himself. "Yes, sir, it's secure."

A pause, then: "There's been a wreck."

Oh, Jesus! One of the guys *did* try to drive home drunk! Kent or Harry—probably Harry, he had been the most inebriated—climbed behind the wheel, and then he . . .

Then Murphy remembered with whom he was speaking, and why it might be so important that he'd want to have a phone conversation on a line that couldn't be casually monitored, and what this particular phrase signified in a different context.

"Yes sir, I understand." His mind was already racing. "Where did it happen?"

"Tennessee. Approximately sixty miles east of Nashville. About an hour and a half ago."

"I see . . ." Murphy glanced around the office, trying to spot his road atlas, before he remembered where he had seen it last: in Steven's room, where he had taken it for a homework assignment. Forget it. "Has anyone . . . I mean, has anyone found the car?"

"We've located the vehicle, but no one's looked inside yet. An ambulance is being sent to check it out. Can you be ready to go in ten minutes?"

Something cold raced up his back. "Ten . . . ? Mr. Ordmann, I haven't even left the . . ."

"We've sent a car to pick you up. A plane's waiting at Dulles, and we've got the rest of the team assembled. You'll be briefed on the way. Can you be ready in ten minutes?"

Murphy was in his robe. His suit was still on the hanger and could probably use a pass with a lint brush; he hadn't even picked out a tie. But an old Adidas gym bag in his closet had some clean clothes left over from last fall's hunting trip, and it would only take a moment for him to pack up his laptop. "I'll be ready."

"Very good. You've got the ball, Dr. Murphy. Don't drop it."

"I won't, sir," he said, managing for the moment to sound much more confident than he felt. "We'll be in touch."

"Good karma," Ordmann said, then he hung up.

Murphy gently placed the receiver in its cradle, sat back in his chair, and let out his breath. Sometime during the night, a light snow had fallen on Arlington. Through the office window, he could see where it had frosted Donna's backyard garden and laid a white skein over the swingset Steve no longer used. It looked cold and lonely out there. He wondered if it was any warmer in Tennessee.

He sighed, then stood up and went to tell Donna that he was going away on a business trip.

Thursday, May 5, 1937: 8:00 P.M.

Thirty-five minutes after the *Hindenberg* docked at Lakehurst Naval Air Station, an explosion in one of the aft gas cells destroyed the airship.

No one was aboard when the fire ripped through the dirigible. All the passengers and crewmembers had disembarked by then, and even the ground crew managed to dash to safety before the burning airship hit the

ground, taking out the mooring mast with it. A newsreel cameraman managed to catch the conflagration on film; it was later remarked how fortunate it had been that the *Hindenberg* hadn't exploded while still in the air, or otherwise an untold number of lives might have been lost.

Franc and Lea watched the fire from the safety of Tom's rented Ford sedan, which he had driven to the outskirts of the aerodrome and pulled over on the shoulder. They had quietly collected their bags and walked down the gangway stairs; a stunned shuffle through customs, where officials stamped the Pannes' passports and welcomed them back to America, then Hoffman met them just outside the receiving area. He instantly started to ask questions, but they signaled him to stay silent until they were out of earshot of the other passengers.

As they walked out to the car, Franc spotted Eric Spehl, still wearing his flight coveralls, climbing into the back of a Checker cab. Unnoticed by either his fellow zeppelin men or the Luftwaffe intelligence officers, the rigger made his getaway. Fifteen minutes later, the bomb went off.

As clanging fire trucks raced down the road toward the inferno, the three of them looked at one another. "Well," Tom said, "at least we haven't created a paradox. We're still here."

Franc stared at the blazing airship. "The hell we haven't!"

"We don't know that yet," Lea said from the back seat. "There's been an anomaly. A serious one, to be sure, but it's still only an anomaly."

"Some anomaly." Franc nodded toward the burning ship. "This isn't like someone in Dallas noticing a couple of our people behind a fence during the Kennedy shooting. That didn't change the course of history. *This* . . ."

"*Oberon's* still there." Tom cocked his head toward the uplink case where it lay open next to Lea; she had just used it to contact the time-ship. "If this was a paradox, Vasili shouldn't be up there and we would have disappeared. Right?"

"Define paradox," Franc said angrily. "Tell me exactly what happens during a spatiotemporal paradox."

"I don't . . ."

"Come on, tell me precisely *how* a spatiotemporal paradox would affect a contemporary worldline . . ."

"Cut it out." Lea snapped the case shut. "We can figure it out after we get to the rendezvous point."

So they drove away from Lakehurst, heading southwest down lonely country roads into the cool New Jersey night. Deep within the Pine Barrens, house lights gradually became farther apart until they disappeared altogether. A low fog had settled upon the marshlands; the sedan's white-walls beat against frost heaves in the weathered blacktop. Lea moved the case to the floor and lay down in the back seat; she remarked how incredibly large automobiles had been during this period, and Tom responded by observing how much gasoline they consumed in order to move

this much mass. Franc, sullen and impatient, switched on the dashboard radio and turned the knob from one end of the dial to another, picking up AM-band stations out of Trenton, Philadelphia, and New York. Ballroom jazz, comedy shows, crime melodramas: he roamed back and forth, searching for something that might explain what had just happened.

Just as they turned off the highway onto a narrow strip of dirt road, a variety show out of New York was interrupted by a news flash. The German airship *Hindenberg*, which had mysteriously exploded an hour and fifteen minutes ago just after it had arrived in New Jersey, had been destroyed by an act of deliberate sabotage. An unsigned communiqué received by the station only a few minutes earlier stated that an underground organization in Germany was claiming responsibility for the act. The note stated that a bomb had been placed aboard the airship to awaken the world to the atrocities being committed by the Nazi government, and to send a clear signal to the German people that Adolf Hitler could yet be overthrown.

Franc switched off the radio. There was a long silence in the car. "That's what I define as a paradox," he said at last.

"We're still here," Tom said softly.

"Which only means that we've survived our own disturbance."

"Who says it's *our* fault?" Lea was sitting up again. "No one knows why Spehl's bomb went off when it did. Maybe the timer was faulty and it was supposed to go off at eight o'clock."

"Or maybe he went back and reset it," Tom said.

Franc nodded. "Sure. He ran into Emma Pannes the day before and decided that he didn't want to sacrifice a beautiful fraulein to the flames."

"So it's *my* fault?" Lea gaped at him. "I can't believe you. . . !"

"I'm joking."

"That's not very funny. I don't even think you're . . ."

"Will both of you just shut up?" Tom gripped the wheel more tightly as he strained to make out the primitive road through the fog. "We can't do anything about it now, so just . . ."

Lea wasn't through. "Do you think this is funny?"

"No, I don't. But it's a possible hypothesis for how . . ."

"Shut up!" Tom yelled. "Goddammit, both of you, just shut up!"

Once again, there was cold and awful silence in the car.

The road finally opened onto a broad clearing where a farmhouse had once stood some ten years before until it had been destroyed by one of the brush fires that periodically raged through the Pine Barrens. Only a half-collapsed brick chimney remained; the rest was rotted cinders, old cedar stumps and high grass, damp with rain and age.

Tom stopped the car and switched off the headlights; a chorus of bullfrogs and crickets greeted them when they opened the doors. Lea shivered and drew her overcoat more closely around her as she instinctively

stepped closer to Franc. She had been born and raised on the Moon; nature sounds made her nervous. Franc put his arm around her as he stared up at the overcast sky. A westerly breeze was blowing the clouds away, revealing crisp bright stars in the moonless sky. "You gave Vasili the correct coordinates, didn't you?" he asked, then saw the expression on her face. "Sorry. Only asking."

Tom pulled the uplink case out of the back seat, carried it a few feet away and set it down. He returned to the car, clicked on the dome light, briefly inspected the car's interior. No, there was nothing here that shouldn't be left behind; Franc and Lea's bags were stowed in the trunk, and they had all their documents and recording equipment with them. He pulled a small gold box out of his breast pocket, thumbed a recessed switch on the side, carefully placed it on the wheel well in the back seat. Five minutes after they departed, the Hertz company would be mysteriously deprived of one Ford sedan, or at least until some hunter chanced upon its charred wreckage.

When he joined Franc and Lea again, he saw that they were staring up at the sky. Looking up, he saw nothing for a moment. Then a small black shape moved past the Big Dipper, a circular patch slightly darker than the night sky. "Better get out of the way," he murmured. "Grab the case."

The three of them hurried to the edge of the clearing. When they turned and looked up again, the shape had expanded into a broad opaque spot that grew larger as it blotted out the stars. Metz had the *Oberon* in chameleon mode; it was now nearly invisible to the naked eye. Even if radar had been in widespread use at this time, the timeship wouldn't have appeared on any screens; the beams would have been deflected by its polymer-coated fuselage. Only the negmass grid on the craft's underside could be detected, and that operated in near-total silence. It wasn't until they heard a low hum and the wet grass of the clearing began to flatten out that they knew the *Oberon* was at treetop level.

The humming grew louder, then the timeship suddenly appeared just above them. Deliberately designed to resemble a classic sombrero-shaped flying saucer, it could have appeared on the cover of a late-twentieth century UFO magazine; indeed, it *had*, for an alien-abduction story debunked by most contemporary experts. Light gleamed from its single porthole as landing gear opened like flower petals from its flat underside between the hemispherical pods of its wormhole generators. *Oberon* seemed to hesitate for just a moment, then the humming of its negmass drive sharply diminished and the timeship settled to the ground.

The research team was jogging toward the craft when a hatch above one of the flanges irised open. Metz appeared as a silhouette at the top of the ladder. "What are you waiting for?" he shouted. "We gotta get out of here! Go, go, go!"

Franc was the first to reach the ladder. "Not so fast," he said, hoisting

the uplink case above his head. "We need to see what's been done here. There might be something we don't . . ."

"What, you mean you're not through yet?" Metz reached down, grabbed the case's handle, and snatched it out of Franc's hand. "Maybe we should drop by Washington on the way up, let you assassinate Teddy Roosevelt . . ."

"It's Franklin, not . . ."

"Who cares? You're done." Metz deposited the case behind him. "I just hope you haven't screwed things up so much that we can't get out of here."

"Dammit, Vasili, it's not our fault!" Lea's voice was outraged. "We don't know what happened, but it's . . . we didn't . . ."

"Save it for the commissioner, Oschner. We're on our way up." Metz disappeared from the hatch. "Get aboard or stay behind. We're out of here in sixty."

"Vasili, wait!" Franc scrambled up the ladder and pulled himself up through the hatch into *Oberon's* airlock. Coming in from the cool New Jersey night, the wedge-shaped compartment was uncomfortably warm. The helmet of the EVA hardsuit lashed against the bulkhead reflected his face like a funhouse mirror. Franc took a moment to pull Lea the rest of the way up the ladder, then he darted through the inner hatch and followed the pilot down the narrow midships passageway to the control room. "Calm down. We've got to talk about . . ."

"There's nothing to discuss, Doctor." Metz entered the compartment, dropped in his seat and ran his palms across the console, clearing the timeship's system for new programming. "And don't tell me to calm down. Not after *this*. Now get your people strapped down. We're lifting."

"Okay, all right." Franc raised his hands. "Get us out of here. Take us to orbit. But don't open a bridge until we've assessed the situation and at least tried to determine what caused this in the . . ."

Metz swung around in his chair to jab a finger at Franc. "Look, Dr. Lu, don't make me give you a remedial lecture in chronospace theory. Causality. Inconsistency paradoxes. The care and feeding of Morris-Thorne bridges. Remember?"

"All I'm saying is, we need to slow down, try to study what . . ."

"Study my ass. I'm making a hole while I can still can." Metz swung back around, began stabbing at the console. Lights flashed orange, green, blue, and red; screens arrayed around the horseshoe displayed ship status, local topography, orbital maps, projected spacetime vectors. Metz glanced over his shoulder as he pulled on his headset. "Sorry, Franc, but you're overruled. I'm the pilot, so what I say goes. I say we make an emergency launch, so we're going. Now get your team in their seats, because it's going to be a fast ride to Chronos."

There was no point in arguing. CRC protocols were strict on this point. Franc was in charge of the expedition's research team, but timeship pi-

lots had final say over what happened once its members were back aboard ship. And Metz was playing the situation by the book.

Franc turned and stalked out of the control room. When the hatch slid shut behind him, he slammed his fist against it in frustration. "Jerk!" he yelled.

Then he stepped across the passageway to the passenger compartment. Hoffman was already strapped into one of the three acceleration couches. "She's in the monitor room," he said before Franc could ask. "I think she's . . ."

"I'll get her. Stay put. Vasili wants to get us out of here." Franc retreated from the hatch and turned toward the last of the timeship's major compartments, located at the opposite end of the passageway from the ready-room. "Lea! Vasili's . . .!"

"I know. I heard." Lea had already discarded her costume and had put on a skinsuit. Franc regretted the change; until Lea shed her nanoskin, the form-fitting bodysuit didn't flatter her middle-aged appearance. He couldn't blame her, though; once they got a chance, he would do the same. Sweat made these period clothes feel sticky. She stood at the pedestal in the middle of the compartment, her fingers dashing across its panel as she opened the library subsystem. "Just give me a minute. I want to see if I can access something from the mission recorders."

"We don't have a minute. Vasili's going for an emergency launch."

"Shut up and give me your cigarette case." Lea had already hardwired her makeup compact to the pedestal; she held out her palm without looking at him. "Hurry."

"We don't have time for this," he repeated, but he dug into his jacket and pulled out the cigarette case. Lea snatched it from his hand, impatiently shook out the unsmoked cigarettes, and ran a cord from the pedestal to the tiny dataport concealed in the bottom of the case. She tapped her fingers at the pedestal, then glanced up at the wallscreen. A red bar crept across the screen; the library subsystem was downloading everything the divots had collected aboard the *Hindenberg*.

"All right, we've got everything," she murmured. "Now let's see what happened in Cell Four just before . . ."

"Never mind that now. We've got to get strapped down." Franc grabbed her by the wrist and hauled her away from the pedestal; she managed to grab the recorders before he propelled her through the hatch toward the passenger compartment. He got her inside just before the hatch sphinctered shut.

They were barely in their couches when the timeship began to rise. Franc glanced at the status panel, and saw that Metz had switched off Oberon's chameleon and gravity screen in order to divert power to the negmass drive. His lips tightened as he silently swore at the pilot. They were in for a rough ride. . . .

Then they were shoved back in their seats as the timeship shot upward into the night. A wallscreen displayed a departure-angle view from beneath the saucer; the lights of the Jersey shore and New York City briefly appeared below them before they were obscured by high cloud-banks, then the *Oberon* punched through the clouds as it headed for space.

Too much, too fast. Franc clenched the armrests as pressure mounted on his chest. They shouldn't be doing it this way. His vision was blurred, but he could make out Lea from the corner of his eye; she looked just as angry as he felt. Damn it, she was *right*. They still didn't understand what had happened down there. He started to raise a leaden hand, then remembered that he had neglected to put on a headset. He couldn't talk to Metz.

Earth's horizon appeared on the wallscreen as a vast dark curve, highlighted by a thin luminescent band of blue. Stars appeared above the blue line at the same instant he felt his body begin to rise from the seat cushion. They had achieved escape velocity; Metz was throttling back the negmass drive. But they had to stop. They had to abort to low-orbit. They needed time to study what had happened aboard the *Hindenberg* before . . .

And then the timeship's wormhole generators went online.

Oberon's AI discovered a quantum irregularity in Earth's gravity well; exotic matter contained within the pods beneath the saucer enlarged the subatomic rift into a funnel large enough for the timeship to pass through, and laced the funnel's mouth with energy fields that would keep the wormhole temporarily stable. Within moments, a small area of space-time was warped into something that resembled a four-dimensional ram's horn: a closed timelike circle. Relentlessly attracted by the wormhole it had just created, the timeship plummeted into the CTC.

It should have been a smooth transition, no more or less violent than the *Hindenberg's* departure from Frankfurt a few days ago. For a few moments, it seemed as if that was what would happen.

Then something that felt like the hand of God slapped the timeship and sent it careening . . . elsewhere.

Friday, January 16, 1998: 10:26 A.M.

The jet was a fifteen-year-old Grumman Gulfstream II, a relic from the days when the government was still able to purchase civilian aircraft manufactured in the United States. On the inside, it only looked ten years old, which was a little better than the last ride on a Boeing 727 Murphy had taken. Yet the seats were threadbare, the overhead compartments smudged with handprints; there had been some turbulence when the jet had taken off from Dulles that had caused the fuselage to creak a bit and gave the woman sitting on the other side of the aisle reason to recite her mantra in a low, tense voice.

Once the jet leveled off at thirty-three thousand feet and the pilot switched off the seat-belt lights, an Army lieutenant walked down the aisle to ask if anyone aboard wanted refreshments before the briefing started. Murphy settled for coffee and a bagel with cream cheese. The woman demanded to know whether the bagels were kosher, the cream cheese was low-fat, and the coffee was from Guatemala. She was miffed when the lieutenant politely informed her that the bagels were frozen and that he didn't know about the fat content of the cheese nor where the coffee beans had come from; she settled for hot tea, and scrutinized the label on the tea bag before she dipped it in her mug.

There were five passengers aboard the Gulfstream, including Murphy himself. The humorless lady was also from OPS, but he didn't know her name; he recognized her only from having passed her in office corridors, so he assumed she belonged to another division. The two military officers were in civilian clothes; so was the FBI man, but he was the only one besides Murphy who was dressed for the outdoors. He sat in the back of the plane, speaking on a phone while he worked on a laptop computer. When Murphy got up from his seat and went aft in search of a bathroom, the FBI man turned aside and cupped his hand over the phone as Murphy went past.

Weird. But not half as weird as when, a half-hour after takeoff, the senior military officer started the briefing.

"Gentlemen, ma'am," he began once his aide had helped everyone swivel their chairs around so that they faced the table behind which he stood, "thank you for being here on such short notice. Your government appreciates your willingness to be summoned to duty so quickly, and I hope it hasn't caused you any undue embarrassment."

He then introduced himself as Colonel Baird Ogilvy; with him was Lieutenant Scott Crawford, also from US Army intelligence. The FBI agent's name was Ray Sanchez; he was here principally to facilitate matters with local law enforcement officials and to act as an official observer. Ogilvy seemed pleasant enough, a grey-haired gentleman in his mid-fifties who would have been at home in a golf cart; his aide was younger and a bit more intense, but he managed a brief smile when he was introduced. Sanchez, who put down his phone only reluctantly, looked as if he was carrying a glass suppository; he frowned when Ogilvy called him by name, but said nothing. Murphy decided at once to give him a wide berth if he could help it. Most of the guys he had met from the Bureau were decent enough chaps, but Sanchez was one of those who had seen one too many Steven Seagal movies.

After the colonel introduced Murphy himself, identifying him as the OPS lead investigator for this mission, he went on to name the last two people on the plane. Murphy put a hand over his mouth when Ogilvy introduced the woman as Meredith Cynthia Luna. Lean and fox-faced, her

brown hair styled in a rigid coif, she looked like a real-estate broker who had dropped acid and seen the face of the Almighty in a breakfast croissant. Murphy knew Luna only by reputation; a psychic from Remote Sensing Division, she was supposedly difficult to work with, apparently believing that she possessed a sixth-sense hotline to another dimension. She preened when Ogilvy mentioned her ESPer abilities, and Murphy wondered if she would demonstrate her talents by proclaiming that they would soon be flying over water.

Not for the first time, Murphy wondered why he was working for the Office of Paranormal Sciences; not for the first time, he remembered the reasons. NASA was dead, salary jobs at the National Science Foundation were vanishing faster than humpback whales, and far more astrologers were gainfully employed these days than astrophysicists. So Murphy did the best he could, trying to be a voice of reason among spoon-benders and firewalkers, and when he found himself contemplating resignation, he reminded himself that there was a mortgage that needed to be paid and a son who had to be sent to college, and thanked God that Carl Sagan was no longer alive so he wouldn't have to tell his old Cornell prof what he was now doing for a living.

As Col. Ogilvy continued, Crawford began passing out blue folders with eyes-only strips across the covers. "At 6:42 A.M. eastern this morning, two F-15C fighters from Sewart Air Force Base outside Nashville were on a training sortie over the Cumberland Plateau sixty-eight miles east-southeast of base when they encountered an unidentified object." Ogilvy's eyes occasionally darted to his folder. "The planes were at thirty thousand, five hundred feet at this time, and the object was on a due-east heading above them, altitude approximately forty-five thousand feet when first sighted, approximately ten to fifteen miles distant from the planes' position. It appeared to be entering the atmosphere at a sharp downward angle of approximately 47 degrees, at an airspeed in excess of Mach 2. Although the object wasn't detected by radar either from the planes or by military or civilian air-traffic control, both pilots reported clear visual confirmation of the object."

Ogilvy flipped to another page. "Upon receiving clearance from base, both planes moved to intercept the object. Upon close approach at thirty-four thousand feet, they described the object as a flying saucer approximately sixty-five feet in diameter and twenty feet high—about the size of their own aircraft—which flew without any visible means of propulsion. At the front of the object's upper hull was a single window."

Meredith Cynthia Luna held up a hand; Ogilvy acknowledged her with a brief nod. "Did the pilots see any aliens within the spacecraft?"

"No, ma'am, the pilots didn't spot any occupants. They were doing the best they could just to match the object's course and speed."

"Did the pilots report receiving any psychic transmissions?"

"Ma'am, the pilots attempted to contact the craft by radio, on both LF and HF bands. They received no transmissions, radio or otherwise." Was Murphy imagining things, or was Ogilvy trying to keep a straight face?

"But it seemed as if the object had entered the atmosphere. Is that correct?"

"Given the fact that it was first spotted in the upper atmosphere and was descending at supersonic speed, that's the impression they had, yes ma'am." Ogilvy held up his hand. "Please let me finish the briefing, then I'll take your questions."

The colonel consulted his notes again. "When they failed to establish radio communication with the craft, both pilots maneuvered their aircraft so they could get a closer look at the object. By this point the craft had decelerated to sub-Mach velocity and it appeared to be leveling off its approach as it passed an altitude of twenty-nine thousand feet. One pilot, Capt. Henry G. O'Donnell, took up position seven hundred feet from the craft's starboard side, while his wingman, Capt. Lawrence H. Binder, attempted to fly closer to the object in order to inspect it. Binder was passing beneath the object's underside when his jet apparently lost electrical power."

"Lost power?" Murphy raised a hand; the colonel nodded in his direction. "You mean, he . . . his jet failed to respond to his controls?"

"I mean, Dr. Murphy, Capt. Binder's aircraft lost *all* electrical power. Avionics, propulsion, telemetry, the works. He said it was if someone had pulled the plug. His plane went into a flat spin, and Binder was forced to manually eject from the cockpit."

"I've heard of this happening before," Meredith Cynthia Luna murmured. "A police officer in Florida had his car lose power when he encountered a spacecraft."

"Did he eject?" Lt. Crawford asked.

Murphy slapped a hand over his mouth. Oh God, don't laugh, don't laugh . . . then he saw Ogilvy forcing a cough into his fist as he shot a look at his aide, and realized that he wasn't the only rational person aboard this plane.

"It's not funny!" Luna's face was red with righteous indignation. "The poor officer suffered a terrible ordeal! He was held captive for twelve hours!" Then she turned to the colonel. "Tell me . . . did the pilot receive any psychic impressions when this occurred?"

Murphy jotted down a note in the margins of his binder: *100% loss of F-15 elec.—EMP?*

Ogilvy ignored her. "Capt. O'Donnell, upon seeing his wingman lose control of his craft while in close proximity of the object, decided that hostile action had been taken by the object. Following Air Force rules of engagement, he fell back one thousand feet, then locked his AIM-9 Sidewinder missile onto the object."

Luna was horrified. "Oh, no! He didn't . . ."

"Yes, ma'am. After attempting one last time to establish radio contact with the object, Capt. O'Donnell launched his missile."

Time unknown

"Hang on!" Metz shouted.

Franc barely had time to grab the armrest of the pilot's chair before the timeship violently pitched sideways. Even so, he was hurled across the control room; his left shoulder slammed against a bulkhead and he slid to the deck.

"Did it hit?" he yelled.

"Detonated in the negmass field." Metz was still buckled in his seat, hauling against the stick as he fought for control. He glanced up at the ship-status screen. "No hull damage. We're lucky. But we're still going down."

Ignoring his bruised shoulder, Franc struggled to his hands and knees, crawled upward along the deck toward Metz's chair. In the last moments before the timeship plunged into Earth's atmosphere, the pilot had managed to reactivate *Oberon's* gravity screen. If he hadn't, the missile's shockwave would have pulverized him against the bulkhead.

A small blessing. *Oberon* was plummeting through Earth's lower atmosphere, less than nine thousand meters above the ground. They didn't know when or where they were, or even how they got there, save that the wormhole had thrown them back toward Earth so quickly that the timeship's negmass drive had drained most of its energy in order to make a safe reentry. The AI had stabilized the ship just enough to keep the crew from being roasted alive, yet the effort had severely drained its fusion cells.

If that wasn't bad enough, two contemporary aircraft had spotted the timeship during its atmospheric entry. One made the mistake of flying within the electromagnetic field cast by *Oberon's* drive, causing the jet to lose power. Although its pilot had managed to escape, his partner apparently misinterpreted the accident as hostile action.

"Can you get us out of here?" The deck was tilting less sharply now as Metz began to level off the timeship. Grasping the armrest, Franc painfully clambered to his knees. "Maybe we can outrun that thing."

"Any other time, no problem." Clutching the stick, Metz stabbed at the console with his free hand. "But power's down 47 percent and dropping, and the field's getting weaker. If that jet launches another missile . . ."

"Understood." The negmass field had effectively shielded the timeship from the missile, but they couldn't count on the same luck again if the jet launched another one. "Hole generators?"

"Sure, I can open a hole." Metz scowled as he punched at the flatpanels, trying to reroute more power to the drive. "If you want to blow an

eighty-klick crater in the ground below us. That'll screw up the world-line nice and proper, won't it?"

"Forget I asked." Stupid question; this was the very reason why timeships always departed from orbit. Franc glanced at a screen. The remaining jet had fallen back a little, but it was still dogging their every move. He tapped the mike he had snagged on his way out of the passenger compartment. "Lea? Got anything on that aircraft yet?"

Her voice came through the earpiece. "*Library identifies it as a F-15C Eagle, circa late twentieth century US Air Force.*" She began reading data from the library pedestal. "*Single-seater . . . maximum speed Mach 2.5 . . . ceiling 18,288 meters . . . range about 5,600 kilometers . . . armament includes 20mm cannon, air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles . . .*"

"Forget that! How do we dodge the thing?"

"Dammit, Franc, how should I know?"

"Tom," Metz snapped, "what's going on back there?"

"*I'm working on it!*" The last time Franc had seen Hoffman, the mission spec was on his hands and knees in the passenger compartment, his arms thrust deep into a service bay beneath the deck plates. "*I've rerouted the gravity subsystem to the negmass, but I can't access the main bus without . . . shit!*"

The deck buffeted violently as the timeship hit heavy turbulence. Through the headset, Franc heard Hoffman curse as he pitched sideways once more; true to his word, he had cut off the gravity screen. Hanging onto the armrest, Franc glanced again at the porthole. The last skeins of cirrus clouds dissipated like smoke, revealing a countryside of rolling hills shadowed by the early morning sun. High country, dotted here and there by white spots and tiny irregular grids, sprawled below them: houses, small towns, farm fields. According to Lea, they were somewhere over Tennessee. . . .

Franc glimpsed something that looked like two parallel black ribbons running through the hills—a highway, perhaps—then an irregular silver-blue surface swam into view. A large lake, its channels meandering past miles of sharp ridgetops. . . .

"We can't do this much longer," Metz murmured. "I'm trying to lose that thing, but it's . . ."

"Put it down," he said softly.

"What?" Metz glanced over his shoulder at him, then followed his gaze to the porthole. "Down *there*?"

"Yeah, down there. Is the chameleon still operational?"

Metz glanced at his board. "If I divert 10 percent power, sure, but it won't work unless we're hugging the ground."

"Not the ground. The lake." Franc reached forward, punched up a close-up shot of the lake below them; two more taps on the panel projected a thermographic false-image. "There's the deep end," he said, pointing

at a dark blue splotch within the lake's widest area. "If you can get down there, do a water landing, maybe we can submerge, lose that thing once and for all."

The pilot's eyes widened. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Probably, but you got a better idea? Maybe you can find a nice little airport. We can always tell the locals we're from Mars." He nodded toward the flatscreen; the jet continued to follow them like an angry terrier. "Or we can let our friend lob another missile at us. Maybe he'll get lucky this time."

Metz's eyes raced from the porthole to the flatscreen to his status board: the lake, the jet, the uncertain status of his craft. Any which way you added it up, it was a losing equation.

"Okay, all right. I'll take us down." The deck canted again as Metz pulled the stick to one side; this time, Franc hung on for dear life. "Now get back to your seat and buckle in. Whatever happens, it's going to be rough."

"Good luck." Franc slapped the pilot's shoulder, then let go of the armrest and flung himself toward the hatch behind him.

He nearly collided with Lea in the passageway; she opened her mouth to speak, but he shoved her into the passenger compartment before him. Hoffman was struggling back onto his knees; the tools from the fixit kit were skittering every which way across the deck, and he had only barely managed to shove the access panel shut.

"What's going on?" he shouted. "What are we doing?"

"Landing in a lake! Hang on, going to be rough!"

Another violent swerve, and Franc fell headfirst into a couch. He managed to wrench its belly strap around himself just as the craft yawed once more.

"*Going evasive!*" Metz's voice yelled in his headset.

Lea grabbed his thigh and clung to him as he grabbed her by the shoulders, but Tom was flung backward against a bulkhead. He slid down the wall, his arms limp at his sides.

"Tom!" Léa started to crawl toward the unconscious man.

"Strap down!" Franc yelled at her, then he flung her toward the adjacent couch. Lea hit the seat hard, but somehow she managed to land in it, not next to it. Dazed, she started pulling the straps around herself.

Franc glanced at Tom; there was nothing he could do for him. The timeship was probably working on 50 percent power or less; Metz was trying to dredge what little energy remained in *Oberon's* cells for a controlled crash landing. Safely strapped down, Lea was shouting at Hoffman again, but he couldn't answer; the mission specialist was out cold.

His throat gnarled with fear, his fingers digging into the armrests, Franc stared at the wallscreen. A rippling blue-green surface scudded past them only a hundred meters below, its edges marked by tall lime-

stone bluffs. A road bridge appeared, shot beneath them with less than ten meters to spare; then it vanished and they were going down, down, down. . . .

"Tom, get up!" Lea was screaming at the top of her lungs. "Tom, wake up, wake up, oh God, we're going to. . . !"

And then they hit the water.

11:57 A.M.

From the Air Force chopper, Center Hill Lake looked cold and grey. High clouds reflected dully off the surface of its meandering channels and tributaries, where the Caney Fork River flowed into deep valleys inundated long ago by a flood control dam. At midwinter, the waterline was at its lowest level; when the UH-60 Blackhawk dropped to about two hundred feet, the noisy clatter of its rotors reverberated off high bluffs as the chopper flew past densely wooded ridges and hilltops.

From his seat behind the pilots, Murphy studied Center Hill Lake with curiosity. Although most of the surrounding hills were filled with summer homes, a few of them almost mansions, none were on the shoreline itself; most looked closed for the winter. Col. Ogilvy, who turned out to be a native Tennessean, told him on the flight out from Sewart AFB that the Army Corps of Engineers, which had erected the dam in the early fifties and maintained it today, had strict regulations against anyone building within five hundred feet of the shore. The few boathouses were ones protected by a grandfather clause in the regulations; most of the summer residents docked their boats at commercial marinas scattered along the lake. The regulations probably seemed draconian to the wealthy Nashville doctors, lawyers, and country musicians who kept summer getaways out here, but the trade-off was one of the most underdeveloped lakes Murphy had ever seen. He gazed down at the bare-branched woods and wondered how many deer he might bag during hunting season.

Then the Blackhawk swept around a bend, and the main channel opened before them: a vast expanse of water stretching several miles from shore to shore, with a tall road bridge towering above a bottleneck at the eastern end of the channel. The pilot brought the helicopter down lower as he banked to the left, and Murphy saw a sandy beach within a shallow lagoon on the opposite side of the channel. The beach belonged to a picnic area; as the chopper came closer, he saw that it had been invaded by the US Army. A large tent had already been erected in the nearby picnic area; a couple dozen figures, most wearing military fatigues, moved around the tent and the olive trucks parked nearby.

Even then, the helicopter didn't immediately head for the beach. Instead, it veered toward the middle of the channel. From his seat next to him, Col. Ogilvy unlatched his seat belt and leaned across Murphy to point at something through the window.

"Down there!" he yelled. "Can you see it?"

Murphy pushed aside the right cup of his ear protector as he looked where the colonel was pointing. At first, he couldn't see anything; then he spotted a tiny island, not much larger than one of the summer houses surrounding the lake. Not an island, really, but rather a large sandbar; a couple of hardy oak trees had managed to survive the lake's seasonal rise and fall, but he doubted that anything more than a few wood ducks lived out there.

Yet he didn't see anything peculiar, save for several small plastic buoys forming a half-circle around one side of the island. "See what?" he yelled back, shouting against the prop noise. "I don't see anything!"

Across the narrow cabin, Meredith Cynthia Luna had her eyes tightly closed; she took deep breaths as her hands fondled a pair of animal energy stones: an armadillo for protection and safety, a butterfly for balance and grace. She had been airsick once already, shortly after the Blackhawk lifted off from Sewart AFB; apparently her painted pebbles didn't work for nausea. Lt. Crawford sat next to her, relief bag in hand just in case she needed it. Her hair remained perfect.

"I can't see anything either!" Agent Sanchez had taken another window and was staring downward. "Where are you looking?"

"Gotta look close!" Ogilvy jabbed a finger at the sandbar. "See that distortion? Like a warped mirror or something?"

Murphy peered out the window . . . and yes, now that the colonel mentioned it, he could detect an odd, semi-circular object shimmering in the shallow water within the buoys. At first glance, it was undetectable, melding almost perfectly with the tiny island and the lake surrounding it. Then the helicopter passed over the object, and he was startled to see its shadow bulge outward slightly, as if reflected by an invisible convex surface.

"That's it!" the colonel shouted. "That's the yew-foh!"

"What's making it do that?"

"Damn if I know! That's why we called you!" Ogilvy reached forward to prod the pilot's shoulder. "Okay, Captain, put us on the ground! We've got work to do!"

White sand kicked up as the copter settled down on a concrete boat ramp within the lagoon; the pilot waited just long enough for his passengers to get clear of his aircraft, then he took it back up into the sky. Now that he was closer, Murphy noticed that the soldiers wore black tabs over the division patches on the shoulders of their parkas: Rangers from the 101st Airborne at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. All wore helmets and sidearms; a few carried M-16s on shoulder straps. Murphy noticed several soldiers using entrenchment tools to fill burlap bags with sand, while others lugged them to shallow foxholes scattered along the beach. One contained a canvas-covered machine gun. The military wasn't taking any chances.

A lieutenant hurried over to Ogilvy, saluted, and began to speak to him in a low voice. Sanchez headed straight for a cement picnic table, where two other civilians had spread out topographic maps; the FBI had already gotten the state police to seal off all roads and highways leading to the lake, under the veiled pretense that a top-secret experimental jet had crashed here. Meredith Cynthia Luna walked on stiff legs to another concrete picnic table, where she sat and tucked her head between her knees.

That left Murphy alone, at least for the moment. Unnoticed by anyone, his hiking boots scuffing against the frozen sand, he sauntered past the soldiers, the sandbag emplacements, the trucks, and the FBI men until he reached the water's edge. Now there was nothing between him and the tiny island; it lay about half a mile across the channel, clearly visible by its lonely stand of oak trees. Yet the crashed UFO was invisible; only the buoys gently bobbing in the water marked its whereabouts.

What allowed it to camouflage itself like that? An energy field of some sort? That was his first guess, considering what happened to the jet that had flown too close to it. The pilot of the second F-15 claimed that his missile exploded before it reached its target, yet he also said that the object nearly disappeared when it got close to the lake; he had been able to follow it only by the shadow it cast against the lake, and he didn't see it clearly again until it skipped across the lake's surface like a flat rock before running aground on the sandbar. So if it was a field, perhaps it wasn't completely impenetrable. It might be able to ward off kinetic-energy sources, like an incoming missile, but was useless against inert matter like . . .

"Find anything interesting, Dr. Murphy?"

Startled by Ogilvy's voice, Murphy turned around so quickly that he lost his balance. "Oh shit, don't do that! You . . ."

"Sorry." The colonel was faintly amused. "Didn't realize you were so nervous."

"I'm not." Not really. Murphy let out his breath, nodded toward the sandbar. "Just trying to figure out what . . . um, what makes it go away like that."

"From what I've been told, nobody knows." Ogilvy pointed further down the beach; a pair of inflated rubber boats lay on the shore. "Six men paddled out there about a half-hour ago. They approached within thirty feet of the sandbar, but couldn't make out anything except that shimmer we saw from the air."

"Did they . . .?"

"No. They were under orders to only recon the area and drop buoys. One man said that he felt his paddle hit something under the water, like a smooth surface, but they didn't see anything when they looked down. It spooked them, so they skedaddled."

A smooth, invisible surface just under the water. "How deep is it out there, Colonel?"

"Maximum depth is about fifty feet. Around the sandbar, only ten to fifteen where the dinghy was. Five or less at the waterline."

Damn! They were right on top of the thing, and still couldn't see it. "This used to be farm country before the dam was built," Ogilvy was saying, "so that's probably the top of a low hill. The yew-foh might have sunk completely if it hadn't hit it."

"Maybe that was it was trying to do."

"Maybe. But why would it want to do that?"

"Well, it was being chased by a fighter, so . . ." Murphy shrugged. "I don't know. Still trying to figure that part out. When I know more, I'll tell you."

Ogilvy nodded, but didn't say anything for a few moments. "Y'know, Dr. Murphy," he said quietly, "you seem to have your head screwed on tight. For an OPS guy, that is."

"How's that, Colonel?" he asked warily.

"Call me Baird. . . ."

"I'm Zack."

"Zack." They shook hands. "You're a normal scientist, aren't you?"

Normal scientist. Like there was another kind. . . . "Astrophysicist, if that's what you're asking."

"I can tell. You're asking questions, not assuming anything. You're not jumping to conclusions, then trying to make the facts fit the answers you've already-figured out. Ms. Luna, on the other hand . . ."

He didn't finish, but stepped aside to let Murphy see for himself. Meredith Cynthia Luna had recovered her poise; she had now taken a lotus position on the picnic table, palms spread upward on her knees, head tilted back on her neck, eyes tightly closed. A handful of soldiers had paused to watch her, until an officer walked by and told them to get back to work.

"Asked her what she was doing," Ogilvy murmured, "and she said she was trying to establish communion. Not communication . . . communion."

On top of everything else, she was a Strieber believer. Lord. . . . "She's not in my division. If she wants anything, give it to her. I don't care, just keep her out of my way."

"So you don't think she's. . . ?"

"Got anything to contribute? Not really. But I can't get rid of her either."

"Sort of figured as much." Ogilvy paused, then went on in a low voice. "Frankly, my people don't have much respect for your people. Cashews and pistachios, we tend to call 'em. But you've got a good rep. Word up is that you're probably the most reliable person at OPS. If you think you've got a lock on this situation . . ."

"I'm flattered, but I don't."

"This is new to all of us, but you're the nearest thing we've got to an expert." Ogilvy took a deep breath. "Look, Zack, we're making it up as we go along. Agent Sanchéz is working with the locals to keep a lid on this thing as long as we can. We've been lucky so far . . . hardly anyone saw this thing go down, and we've got the area bottled up. But that dog won't hunt much longer."

"How much longer?"

"Six, twelve hours. Twenty-four, tops. My people are ready to fly in more people and equipment, but we need to know what we're dealing with first. Think you can do it, Dr. Murphy?"

Ogilvy posed this as a question, but it really wasn't one. They both had higher authorities to whom they had to answer, and nobody upstairs was going to accept no for an answer.

"Yeah, I can do it," Murphy said.

Time unknown

"I'm sorry, Tom."

Franc gently folded Hoffman's hands together on his chest, then pulled a blanket over the body. He spent another moment with the mission specialist, then carefully stood up and made his way upward along the precariously slanted deck to the hatch.

He had just left the passenger compartment when something thumped against *Oberon's* hull. Bracing himself against a bulkhead, he listened carefully, but didn't hear anything until Metz's voice rang out from the control room.

"Lu! Get in here! We've got a problem!"

Like they didn't have enough already. Franc pitched himself down the dark passageway until he reached the ajar hatch to the control room, then dropped to his hands and knees and crawled into the compartment. Seated at his station, Metz was a shadow against the luminescent band of emergency lamps. Most of the screens glowed with status reports; one, however, displayed a camera view from outside the timeship.

"Oh, no," Franc murmured. "Where did they come from?"

Just outside *Oberon*, three soldiers in a rubber boat. One cradled an archaic rifle in his arms; the second had an old-fashioned film camera aimed straight at them; the third gently guided the boat with a long plastic paddle. The first two were looking back at the oarsman, who gazed uncertainly into the water just beneath the boat.

"I didn't see them coming," Metz said in a low voice, as if afraid the intruders could hear them. "I had my head under the console, didn't know they were out there until . . ."

"I know. I heard it, too." They were floating just above the submerged end of the ship; the guy in the rear must have hit the hull with his paddle. "Is the chameleon functional?"

Metz glanced at one of the displays. "Still working. They can't see us. But if they get much closer . . ."

He didn't finish his thought. It hardly mattered. The soldiers knew they were here. The first vehicles had arrived on the nearby shore little more than an hour after *Oberon's* crash-landing, and although the chameleon hid the timeship from direct view, a vague outline of its hull could be detected from certain angles in midday sunlight. Helicopters had circled low over the sandbar several times already, but this was the closest any of the locals had dared to venture.

At least the airlock hatch was underwater. In fact, judging from the position of the raft, it was directly beneath the soldiers. The locals would have to send out divers to find it. Judging from the amount of activity on the shore, though, it wouldn't be long before it occurred to them to do so.

They watched as the men in the boat took a few more pictures—at such close range, they were probably photographing distorted reflections of themselves—before they hastily paddled away again. Metz let out his breath. "Close one. Worse than Dallas."

"Far worse than Dallas," Franc said, but not accusingly. Recrimination was pointless by now; whatever happened in 1937, they were foiled but good. One expedition member was dead, his neck broken during that first violent impact with the lake. The timeship was down, its operational condition uncertain. Contemporaries had discovered their whereabouts, and these weren't aborigines who would leave little more record of their brief passage than a few legends and some mysterious cave drawings.

Worst of all, they were shipwrecked in the late twentieth century. The most dangerous era in the history of humankind.

"They're cautious now, but they'll be back." Franc clambered forward to peer at the screens. "How's it coming so far?"

"Do you want the good news first, or . . . ?" Metz caught Franc's stern look. "Never mind. I've been working my way through the system to the primary drive. It's still down, but the AI's located the major problem. Main bus is damaged, a few boards are shot. I've retasked some repair nannies and sent them in, so they should complete their work in about an hour or so. Backup's fully operational, though, so I'm . . ."

Franc impatiently twirled a finger, and Metz got to the point. "Pods are still intact. The drive can be fixed, although the grid's flooded and it won't work at optimal levels until we've been airborne for at least sixty seconds."

"So we can get out of here. Right?"

Metz didn't reply.

"Come on, Vasili. We can or we can't. Which is it?"

"Two problems. The first, you know about already. Energy reserve's down to 15 percent, just enough to keep the chameleon operational and the AI alive. I've got the cells on full recharge. Fortunately, we can elec-

trolize all the hydrogen we need from the water around us . . . one good thing about crashing in a lake. AI estimates that we'll be able to lift off again within six hours, less if we reserve internal power as much as we can."

"Including low-orbit escape and wormhole entry?" Franc asked. Metz nodded, but he wasn't smiling. He looked even more tense than usual. "So what's the second problem?"

The pilot let out his breath. "We don't know when we are. Where, that's certain . . . the AI established a fix on our coordinates before we crashed. Tennessee, Cumberland Plateau, Center Hill Lake . . . the numbers are safely stored away. And judging from what we've seen so far, we're in the late twentieth. Probably in the 1990s, but . . ."

"What year?"

"Can't tell you that," Metz shook his head. "That's the problem. Primary telemetry grid is down, so we can't pull in outside feed. No way to lock onto the local net. I might have been able to get a lock before we crashed, but I didn't have a chance to . . ."

"I understand." Under the circumstances, Vasili had done the best he could just to get them safely to the ground. However, lacking a precise fix on when they were, *Oberon's* AI was unable to accurately plot a CTC return trajectory. This was something that couldn't be guesstimated; the AI had to know exactly when and where in chronospace the timeship now existed. Spatial coordinates were estimated, but temporal weren't; the most vital element of the four-dimensional equation was missing.

"Sorry, Franc." For once, Metz had put his arrogance in a drawer. "I wish I could give you better news, but . . ."

"Any idea of what caused this? The paradox . . . the anomaly, I mean . . ."

"Lea's still working on it. You might want to check with her." Then he turned back to his console, and didn't look up again until Franc left the control room.

He found Lea at the library, running through the footage their divots had captured from the *Hindenberg*. Like Franc, she had taken a few minutes in the lav to rinse off her nanoskin; her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail that fell over her broad shoulders as she braced herself against the pedestal. She didn't look up when he entered the compartment.

"Find anything?"

"Yes, I have," she said. "I think I've isolated the divergence point."

Franc propped himself against the pedestal as Lea typed a command into its keypad. "There was a lot of sift through, so I concentrated on the last three hours before we landed. We passed over Lakehurst at four o'clock, but had to divert because of wind gusts and high cumulus clouds at the field."

"Uh-huh, I remember."

"We flew south along the Jersey shore to ride it out. An hour and a half later, according to the historical record, Captain Pruss received a telegraph message from the field; stating that the weather conditions were still bad and recommending that he not attempt a landing until later. He wired back a message, stating that he wouldn't return to Lakehurst until he was given clearance. That message was sent at 5:35 P.M. local. Now watch..."

She pressed the PLAY button on the pedestal. The wallscreen displayed the vast interior of the *Hindenberg's* envelope. Franc recognized the angle immediately; it was the catwalk beneath Cell No.4, where he had placed a divot during their tour of the airship. The digital readout at the bottom of the screen read 5.6.38: 1741:29 when a lone figure walked past the divot. As he paused at the bottom of the ladder to quickly glance both ways, his face became visible for a brief instant. It was Eric Spehl, the rigger who had placed the bomb.

Spehl ascended the ladder, then passed out of camera range. "He's gone about six minutes," Lea said, tapping the pedestal again to skip forward, "and then..."

At 5.6.38: 1747:52, Spehl reappeared on the ladder, climbing back down from Cell No.4. Once again, he hastily glanced around, then walked back up the catwalk, heading toward the airship's bow. "I checked the record from this divot again," Lea said, "both before and after the *Hindenberg* landed. He didn't come back here again."

"He came back and reset the bomb. I'll be damned."

"That's a good way of putting it, yes. And he did it just after the second time Captain Pruss postponed the landing."

"But why didn't he do this earlier?" Franc rubbed his chin thoughtfully; it felt good to feel his own flesh again. "Why the sudden change of mind?"

Lea let out her breath. "Maybe you were right. Perhaps he remembered the woman he encountered at this same spot..." she pointed at the frozen image of the empty catwalk "... the day before, and decided that he didn't want to be responsible for her death. So he came back and reset the timer so that the bomb wouldn't detonate until exactly eight o'clock, by which time he was certain the ship would be safely moored and all the passengers disembarked."

Franc wanted to tell her that she was wrong, that she was blaming herself needlessly for what had happened. The evidence wasn't inarguable; he wasn't convinced. He couldn't believe that history had been changed only because the two of them had been aboard the *Hindenberg*.

"So we created an alternate world-line," he said.

"Right. The airship was destroyed anyway, but this time the German resistance movement was able to claim credit for what Spehl had done."

"We heard that much on the car radio. What sort of difference did it make?"

"That's the question." She drummed a pensive fingertip against the pedestal. "Suppose, just for the sake of argument, that Spehl accomplished what he had intended. The *Hindenberg* was the very symbol of Nazi power. Assume that its destruction was the first act of open dissent that finally led to Hitler being ousted from power. Perhaps one of the subsequent assassination attempts was successful. . . ."

"Come on . . . that's one assumption too many."

"Perhaps, but . . ." She hesitated. "Well, there's one more thing. It's not much, but . . ."

"Let's have it."

She turned back to the pedestal, began tapping in another set of commands. "Remember when the jets intercepted us after *Oberon* entered the atmosphere? When they tried to radio us?" He raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. "I searched the flight recorder, full AV mode, then had the library backtrack historical sources. Here's what I found."

The two jets appeared onscreen as a pair of angular dots racing ahead of vapor trails; there was no digital readout at the bottom of the screen. As the dots began closing on the camera, they heard a static-filled radio voice:

"*Sewart Tower, this is Wildcat One, we've got a confirmed bogey at . . .*"

Lea froze the image, then gently moved a forefinger across the touchpad until a tiny square appeared over the nearest of the two jets. She then enhanced the image until it was magnified several hundred times; a window opened on the screen, showing the aircraft in greater detail. Another couple of keystrokes, and a wire-frame composite appeared next to the photographic image.

"The library positively identified this as an F-15C Eagle," she went on. "A one-seat jet fighter used by the United States Air Force from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, when it was replaced by an updated version of the same jet, the two-seat F-15E. We know that they had to be F-15C's because only one pilot bailed out of the Eagle that flew through our negmass field."

"So?"

"During radio communications between the jets and their home base, you can clearly hear the base being referred to as Sewart Tower. I checked with the library system, and it turns out Sewart Air Force Base was decommissioned in the late 1960s. It shouldn't be there, let alone sending up fighters not put in service until ten years later."

Franc stared long and hard at the split-image on the wallscreen. "All right," he murmured. "You've convinced me. We're in an alternate world-line . . ."

"An alternate world-line we inadvertently created. And when we tried to return from 1937 to our own future, we ran into a rift in chronospace . . . a divergent loop in a closed timelike circle. We're lucky that we weren't destroyed completely. As it was, we were dumped out here . . ."

"In a parallel universe," Metz said.

Franc and Lea looked around to find the pilot leaning against the hatch. How long he had been there, they couldn't know; he had probably heard most of the discussion. Just as well, Franc thought. It would save them the trouble of reiterating everything Lea had learned.

"Don't bother," Metz held up a hand. "I know. I screwed up. If we had remained in '37, studied this a little longer, we might have seen this coming. I'm sorry. It's my fault."

"No, Vasili. It's everyone's fault." Holding herself up against the pedestal, Lea turned toward him. "Paradoxes like this have been postulated for a long time. Previous expeditions have been lucky until now. We were stupid to think our luck would hold out."

"Forget it," Franc said. "Point is, how do we get out of here?"

No one said anything for a moment.

"First thing," Lea said softly, "we have to find out what time it is."

3:00 P.M.

The second time the Rangers visited the sandbar, they approached the saucer from the opposite side of the tiny island, with four men in each of the two inflatable boats. They rowed slowly enough as to not cause any ripples when they dipped their oars in the water, and they observed strict silence during the journey, using hand signals to communicate. They went armed, with two of the soldiers carrying 35mm cameras and camcorders.

Col. Ogilvy placed Lt. Crawford in charge of the operation; Murphy accompanied the landing party in the role of a civilian advisor. Not surprisingly, Meredith Cynthia Luna objected to being left behind. After two hours of psychic meditation, she declared that the UFO was inhabited by aliens from a planet located somewhere in the Crab Nebula; on the eve of the Third Millennium, they had come to invite Earth into the Galactic Federation. Ogilvy heard her out, then handed her an M-16 and asked if she needed a refresher course in how to use it. It was a good ploy; she dropped the unloaded rifle as if it was a medium-rare steak, and although she bitched about approaching peaceful emissaries from another star system with weapons, the argument was effectively ended.

Murphy felt the bottom of his boat slide over the sandy shallows a few feet from the island. Crawford pointed to the sandbar, then balled a fist and pumped it down twice. The two Rangers at either end of the raft hopped out; their boots had barely splashed into the freezing water before they grabbed guy ropes and started hauling the boat ashore. About twenty feet away, the four soldiers in the second raft were doing the same. Everyone crouched low, rifles in hand, yet the Rangers were so quiet that a handful of ducks lounging in high weeds at the tip of the sandbar barely noticed their presence.

It wasn't until the troops had taken positions behind the two oaks that Crawford signaled Murphy to get out of the raft. The sandbar was littered with beer cans, washed-up sandwich wrappers, and lost fishing lures. Between the two trees was a small circle of blackened rock, a rudimentary fireplace left by boat bums. The tree trunks were carved with initials; as Murphy knelt down behind one of the oaks, something jabbed against his knee. He looked down, spied a tiny hand sticking out of the soil, and reached down to pull up a sand-crusted Darth Vader action figure. A toy left here last summer by some child; the irony was inescapable. He smiled and tucked it into a breast pocket of his parka; perhaps Steven would like to have it.

Past the trees, though, there was nothing to be seen on the other side of the island. At least nothing that looked like an alien spacecraft, from the Crab Nebula or otherwise. Yet, as he looked closer, it seemed as if the waterline was distorted in a strange way, the late afternoon sun casting queer, inconsistent shadows upon the beach. If he could only get a little closer. . . .

Murphy glanced one way, then another. The Rangers lay on their bellies on either side of him, nervously peering over their rifles as if expecting some monster from a fifties sci-fi flick to suddenly come roaring out of the water. Crawford tapped him on the shoulder, raised a level palm, lowered it to the ground, then pointed toward the opposite side of the sandbar. What the hell did he expect him to do, crawl across the island?

"Aw, nuts," Murphy said aloud. "This is silly." Then, before Crawford could stop him, he stood up and started walking toward the area of distortion.

The lieutenant called his name, the Rangers looked up at him in shocked confusion, but Murphy didn't stop. Moving one step at a time, he raised his hands to shoulder height, hands out flat. His heart trip-hammered against his chest, his parka felt a little too warm; suddenly, he wondered if this was such a good idea after all. Yet there was no backing down; if he retreated now, Crawford would probably have him hog-tied and rowed back to the campground. And he was already past the trees, only a few yards from the waterline.

The area of distortion had a rounded look to it. As he drew closer, an image of himself abruptly appeared before him, flattened out as if in a translucent funhouse mirror. He reached out his right hand to touch the reflection. . . .

His fingers met a cool, invisible surface. He was so surprised that his hand involuntarily jerked back. "Hey!" he yelled. "I found something!"

"Dr. Murphy, get back here!" Crawford shouted.

Murphy ignored him. He laid both palms against the surface, gently moved them across back and forth. He'd rather expected a tingle, and

was mildly astonished not to receive it. Whatever was causing the invisibility effect, it wasn't an energy field. He glanced at his wristwatch and observed that the second hand was still moving. If an electromagnetic source of some sort had disabled one F-15 and detonated the missile of a second, it wasn't active now.

Behind him, he heard soldiers scuttling closer. Crawford was on the radio: "Grumpy to Stepsister One, Grumpy to Stepsister One. Snow White has approached bogey, established presence. Dwarves in position. Please advise. Over . . ."

He glided his hands across sloping surface, carefully exploring it as he established a mental map of the object. It seemed to go all the way down to his ankles, then it abruptly stopped, as if he had reached an edge of some sort. His reflection became sharper when he got closer, warped when he got further away. Fascinated, he carefully lifted his right leg and braced his knee against the surface. Yes, it was definitely a metal hull of some sort. Putting his full weight against it, he gradually inched forward on his hands and knees. . . .

He almost laughed out loud when he realized what he must seem to be doing: crawling in midair, at least five feet above sand and water. Somewhere behind him, he heard the soft whir-and-click of an automatic shutter. One of the soldiers handling the camera record was taking pictures of him. Murphy was just enough of a ham that he didn't want to miss the opportunity. Careful not to not lose his balance, he shifted his center of gravity to his haunches, rested the soles of his boots against the invisible surface, then slowly stood up. Good grief, he was . . .

At that instant, the UFO materialized.

One moment, it wasn't there. The next, it was: an enormous silver bowl turned upside-down and cast up against the sandbar, with almost half of it submerged beneath the water.

Startled, Murphy turned around too quickly; his feet lost their purchase and he fell down against the side of the saucer. The breath was almost knocked out of him; he slid halfway down the hull before he threw out his hands and braked his fall by sheer friction. As he fell, his head jerked up and . . .

At the top of the craft was a large, round turret, much like the crown of a hat. In the center of the turret was a small square porthole. As Murphy slid down the saucer, an exterior shutter whisked sideways across the window, closing so quickly that he barely saw it before it molded so perfectly with the rest of the hull that it was impossible to tell it had ever been there at all.

Even so, in that briefest fraction of a second, Murphy caught a glimpse of something peering out at him. No . . . not something, but someone.

A human being.

Time unknown

The amber haze of winter sun briefly set the lake on fire before it set behind the hills, yet the darkness wasn't complete. The timeship gleamed brightly within the halo of portable floodlights set up along the sandbar; tiny figures moved along the tiny island, some moving equipment into place, others standing guard with weapons in hand. Rubber boats shuttled back and forth across the channel; helicopters orbited almost constantly, their searchlights skimming across the dark waters.

Franc waited until night had completely fallen before he emerged from hiding. He had crouched in the shallows at the farthest end of the lagoon for the past half-hour, raising his head above the surface only when he thought the darkness would conceal the bulge of the EVA suit's helmet. The camp was little more than fifty meters from his position, yet never once had anyone ventured over here. So long as he remained quiet, no one would know he was nearby.

It was a dangerous scheme, to be sure, but so far it had worked well. The moment he exited the timeship, Metz switched off *Oberon's* chameleon. Its abrupt appearance so thoroughly rattled the soldiers who had just invaded the island that no one noticed the telltale air bubbles caused by the opening airlock. Franc had fallen less than three meters before his boots sank into the muddy silt; he waited a few minutes, peering upward through the water to see if anyone had detected his presence, then he began his long hike across the lake bottom.

It had taken nearly two hours to reach the end of the lagoon. He didn't switch on the helmet lamps until he was twenty feet below the surface; by then, he had already paused to allow for pressure equalization. Lea had programmed the heads-up display with a map of the lake, but it could only show what lay above the water, not below it. The lake bottom was covered with man-made debris of every shape and size: rusting soda cans, coolers filled with muck, shapeless pieces of painted wood, fiberglass and metal, broken fishing poles, even an ancient automobile that had loomed out of the brown limbo like a dinosaur carcass. Artifacts from an age of negligence.

The hardsuit would only be the latest addition to the lake's collection. When he was out of the water, safe within the woods along the shore, Franc lay on his back and struggled out of its ceramic carapace. The wool suit he had worn on the *Hindenberg* offered scant protection against the chill night air, but it would have to do; it was the only twentieth-century clothing he had saved from 1937. He took a few minutes to drag the EVA armor back to the lake shore and shove it into the shallows; he heard a soft gulp as it swallowed water, then it disappeared from sight. With luck, it wouldn't be found for another dozen years or so, if ever.

Franc pulled up the coat lapels and tucked his hands beneath his armpits. He felt the tiny square of the compad in his shirt pocket, and

briefly considered using it to contact the *Oberon*. No, that was a bad idea; the locals might be scanning carrier frequencies, including microwave. Better not tip his hand until he was good and ready. Lea and Vasili would just have to sweat a while longer. At least they were warm enough to sweat. . . .

Trying not to think about the cold, Franc began making his way through the dense thicket, careful not to step on any frozen branches underfoot. He heard the muted voices of soldiers on the nearby beach; when he paused to look back, he could just make out the lights encircling the *Oberon*. He regarded the distant timeship for a moment, just long enough to make him wonder at the lunacy of his own idea, then he turned and began trudging up the wooded slope.

Dozens of houses surrounded him, on the hillsides above the lake, but he could see lights from none of them. He briefly considered breaking into one, but decided to hold that only as a last resort. Even if they were presently unoccupied, these homes might have intruder alarms; he didn't possess the tools necessary to circumvent them.

Besides, his task was relatively simple from here on. All he had to do was locate a public telephone. If he could just make his way to a paved road, he knew that a phone wouldn't be distant. This was late-twentieth-century North America, after all. The locals loved telephones.

Road. Phone. Information. What could be more easy?

Wondering why Lea couldn't have done this instead, Franc fought his way through the dark and frigid night.

6:11 P.M.

Dinner was a brown vinyl bag containing a MRE: a Meal Ready to Eat or a Meal Rejected by Ethiopians, depending which definition one wished to accept. Inside were green foil wrappers containing diced cold turkey in gooey brown gravy, a tasteless potato patty, a handful of crackers, a packet of instant coffee, and some wispy blue tissue that Murphy first assumed was a napkin until he was informed that it was toilet paper. Eating at a picnic table by lantern light, he managed to choke down half of the MRE before he took the rest to a garbage can. He should have been ravenous, but the events of the last couple of hours had left him without much of an appetite.

Shortly after he and Crawford returned from the sandbar, Col. Ogilvy had held a briefing for the civilian advisors in the command tent. The facts themselves were clear: although the saucer inexplicably became visible at 1505, it had remained silent since then. Listening equipment set up around the craft hadn't disclosed any new information, no hatches had been discovered, and aside from what Murphy alone had seen in that brief instant before its single porthole closed, the craft's occupants hadn't chosen to reveal themselves.

Cynthia Meredith Luna remained adamant that the craft was an alien spaceship from a distant star system, and insisted that it contained emissaries from an interstellar federation. The possibility that these travelers might be human, or at least human-like, only helped her embroider her revelation a little more: the human form wasn't unique only to the planet Earth, but was widespread throughout the universe, and these "parahumans" were deliberately seeking out others of their own kind. We shouldn't be confronting them with weapons, she charged, but had to find a more peaceful means of communication. She suggested that all the Rangers should immediately withdraw from the sandbar, and allow her and several other OPS psychics to congregate on the island to attempt telepathic communication.

That was when Ogilvy laid down his cards. Since the Pentagon believed that the object posed a possible threat to national security, it had been decided that an attempt would be made to force entry. Metal-cutting torches used by the Navy for submarine rescue work were being flown in from Groton, Connecticut, along with technicians trained in their use. At 2400 hours, they would be deployed on the sandbar, where they would attempt to penetrate the object's hull.

Luna objected, and for once Murphy found himself in agreement, albeit for different reasons. They didn't know what was out there, but the fact that it had deliberately dropped its cloak tended to argue that the craft's occupants meant no harm. He needed more time to study the object; perhaps it hadn't come from the Crab Nebula, but neither was it from Tennessee.

Ogilvy had held firm: there would be no further debate on this point. This mission was under Defense Department auspices, and his orders had come from the highest levels. The colonel ended the briefing by telling everyone that chow would soon be served at the roach wagon, and then he closed his notebook and walked away.

Sanchez collared Murphy just before he went in search of a hot and tasty MRE. Although the military was handling the investigation, the FBI had jurisdiction over civilians working on this incident; this meant OPS was now working for the Bureau. Because Murphy hadn't yet received Top Secret security clearance, he would have to sign a document which would ensure that he wouldn't disclose anything he had heard or seen to anyone who didn't have similar clearance. So far as the public was concerned, the incident at Center Hill Lake never happened.

The document would soon be faxed to Sanchez. Once he received it, he would bring it to Murphy for his signature. One look at the agent's face told Murphy that there was no question whether he would sign it. Not unless he wanted to risk losing his job, let alone being sent to prison.

So dinner had been indigestible and the company worse, and Murphy found himself alone once more. The night was cold, the wind rising now

that the sun was down. He pulled up his parka's hood and looked for a place to hide. The command tent had been taken over by Ogilvy and Sanchez, and he didn't want to see them right now. He briefly considered taking a quick nap in one of the Army trucks, but realized that he wasn't tired anyway. His eyes roamed to the distant sandbar, and the silver saucer captured within a circle of floodlights. All things considered, he was tired of looking at the bloody thing; just for a little while, he wanted to get away from all this.

So he decided to take a walk.

It was surprisingly easy to leave camp. No one had placed a guard on him, after all, and he didn't tell anyone that he was going away. A narrow paved road led uphill from the entrance to the picnic area; although a lone soldier stood watch at its gate, he didn't object when Murphy told him that he wanted to take a short stroll and would be back soon. The sentry was there to keep people from sneaking in; since Murphy only wanted to stretch his legs, where was the harm? The sergeant informed him that there was a campground store a half-mile up the road, near the top of the hill. It was closed down, of course, but there was a Coke machine out front. Would Murphy mind bringing back a soda for him? Murphy didn't mind: one ice-cold Dr Pepper, coming up.

The breeze seemed to let up a bit once he was away from the water, but it rattled the bare branches around him. He tasted the scent of winter pine as the night closed in around him; the lights behind him vanished entirely, and he threw back his head to check out the constellations. It would have been a rare treat, since light pollution in the DC area forbade any decent stargazing, yet the sky was still overcast. A dark night; even after his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could barely see his own hand when he held it at arm's length. Too bad.

Before he knew it, he'd reached the top of the road, where the mellow glow of a forty-watt bulb faintly illuminated a crossroad nestled in a saddleback between two short hills. There was a small general store at the junction, one that undoubtedly offered minnows, Moon Pies, and Orange Crush during season. The windows were shuttered, its door locked, but the porch light had been left on, illuminating the battered Coca-Cola machine between an empty bait tank and a pay phone.

Someone was using the pay phone.

At first he thought it was one of the soldiers, perhaps sneaking a call home to a wife or girlfriend, but when Murphy got closer he saw that the figure wasn't wearing military gear. Indeed, he seemed to be underdressed for the weather: a dark wool suit and nothing more, not even an overcoat. His back was turned, but even from a distance Murphy could tell that he was shivering in the cold.

Strange. Maybe he was a hitchhiker who had lost his way. Yet all the roads leading to this area had been blocked by state police; even then, the

nearest highway was several miles away. Murphy studied the man at the phone as he walked toward the porch. Perhaps he was from one of the lakeside houses; Ogilvy had told them that they were summer homes, but maybe one of them was occupied year-round. Yet if that was the case, why would a permanent resident be using a pay phone to. . . ?

"Thank you . . . yes, that would be most helpful."

In the stillness of the night, Murphy heard the stranger's voice clearly. It held an odd accent that he couldn't quite place: British-American, yet with a faint Asian inflection. . . .

"Yes, operator, would you be so kind as to tell me the exact date? Yes, ma'am . . . today's date. And the year, please."

The date? The year? What, he didn't have a calendar?

The porch steps creaked when Murphy put his weight on them. Startled by his sudden appearance, the stranger looked up sharply, all but dropping the receiver from his hand.

"Sorry," Murphy said automatically. "Didn't mean to interrupt."

The man at the phone looked vaguely Eurasian. He stared at Murphy through wire-rim glasses, then seemed to remember what he had been doing a moment earlier. He raised the receiver again. "I'm sorry, ma'am . . . could you repeat that, please?"

Murphy walked over to the Coke machine, dug into his trouser pockets for change. He felt the stranger's eyes upon him as he found a couple of quarters and fed them into the slot. He had to be a vagrant; his clothes were so old-fashioned, they had to have come from Salvation Army. Yet even the most destitute homeless men he had seen huddled on steam grates in downtown DC wore cast-off down coats or old baseball jackets. The last time Murphy had seen men's apparel of this style was in old photos of his grandfather as a young man.

"Thank you, ma'am. You've been very helpful." The stranger prodded the rim of his glasses as if adjusting them, then hung up the phone. He blew into his hands, cast a furtive glance at Murphy, then started to walk toward the steps.

"Cold night," Murphy said.

The stranger hesitated. "Pardon me?"

"Cold night." Murphy pushed the Dr Pepper button; there was a heavy clunk deep within the vending machine, then a can rattled down the chute. "At least twenty."

"Twenty what?"

"Twenty degrees. The temperature."

"Oh . . . well . . ." Drawing his coat lapels more closely around him, the man nodded in the general direction of the road behind him. "It doesn't bother me. I don't live far away. Just down the road. Came down to use the road . . . the phone, I mean."

Was it his imagination, or did his voice sound a bit different now? Mur-

phy bent to pick up the can of soda, and the stranger hurried past him. "I didn't know anyone lived here year-round," Murphy added. "I thought all these places belonged to summer people."

"A few of us stay through the winter." The other man took off his glasses, carefully folded them, placed them into his coat pocket. "Excuse me, but I . . ."

"Want to get home. Sure." Murphy slipped the unopened soda into a pocket of his parka. "Take it easy."

"Yes . . . uh, yeah." He trotted down the porch steps. "I'll take it easy. You take it easy, too."

Murphy watched the stranger huddle into himself and quickly walk away, moving out of the faint glow of the porch light as he began marching up the road leading to the top of the nearest hill. Poor bastard probably lives in a trailer, he mused. Can't afford a phone of his own, so he has to hike down here when he wants to make a call. Hope he's got a good space-heater or something to keep him warm. . . .

But why would anyone call an operator to find out today's date?

Crazy people. Crazy people in Washington, crazy people in Tennessee. Crazy people still working for OPS even though they knew better. Murphy shrugged, then went down the steps. He'd better get back to camp before Ogilvy or Sanchez or someone else missed him. The sergeant minding the checkpoint was probably thirsty for his Dr Pepper.

He had only walked a short distance before he realized that he could use a soda himself. No sense in going back with only one soft drink; it was going to be a long night. Might as well grab one for the road. So he turned around and jogged back to the lonesome Coke machine.

When he searched his pockets, though, he discovered that he only had a quarter. Tough luck . . . then he glanced at the adjacent pay phone, and realized that the guy he just met had been talking to an operator.

Why would anyone walk all this way just to . . . ?

Never mind. Point was, he hadn't retrieved his change from the return slot. Probably too cold to remember that he had money coming back to him. And since the phone took twenty-five cents, there might be enough left in there for Murphy to buy himself a Sprite.

Murphy stepped over to the phone and poked an inquisitive finger into its tiny drawer. Sure enough, two dimes and a nickel. He dug them out, jingled them in his fist, then walked over to the Coke machine. He slipped his quarter into the slot and was about to slide home one of the dimes when he did a double-take.

It was a Mercury dime.

He hadn't seen a Mercury dime since he was in grade school.

Then he opened his palm and saw another Mercury dime and a buffalo nickel.

What were the chances of this occurring by accident? So far beyond the

realm of probability that Murphy instantly rejected it as an explanation. And these coins looked good as new.

Okay, so maybe the stranger was a rare coin collector. Yeah, right. A rare coin collector who couldn't afford decent winter clothes, but drops spotless Mercury dimes and buffalo nickels into pay phones. Well, maybe he was an absent-minded collector who used rare coins to call operators on pay phones to ask them what time . . .

And just then, something Harry Cumisky had said last night at the Bullfinch came back to him.

Friday, January 16, 1997: 6:48 P.M.

Careful not to switch it off, Franc folded the compad and thrust it into his pocket, then clenched the jacket more tightly around himself. The wind at the top of the hill was fierce and bone-chilling; his legs shook involuntarily, and he had to clench his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. He stamped his feet against the blacktop in a vain effort to warm his frozen toes.

"Hurry up," he whispered, glancing up at the opaque sky. "Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up . . ."

It wasn't only the cold that made him impatient. The chance encounter with the local had unnerved him to the point that he had almost forgotten his errand; it had taken an conscious effort to store the exact date and time in the memory of his faux spectacles. The man who had come to use the vending machine had been more than casually interested in his presence at the pay phone, and it wasn't merely late-twentieth-century snoopiness. He might have been from one of the nearby homes, but Franc suspected otherwise.

Well, it didn't matter much now. Metz was probably lifting off even now; once aloft, he'd find Franc by homing in on the signal from his still-active compad. He looked up again, although he knew Metz had probably reactivated the chameleon and that he wouldn't be able to see the time-ship until it was . . .

"Okay . . . who are you . . . anyway?"

The voice from the darkness was strained and out of breath, but familiar nonetheless. Franc whirled around, searching the road behind him.

"I said . . . who are you?"

The man from the store.

Franc finally made him out. Only a few meters away, struggling up the hill toward him.

"Nobody you would know, sir," he replied. "I just live around here."

"I . . . kinda doubt that." The stranger stopped; he bent over and rested his hands on his knees, gasping for breath. He must have run all this way. "Nobody . . . lives around here . . . in winter. If they did, they'd . . . they'd . . . have their own phone."

"I don't," Franc's mind raced. The *Oberon* would be here any minute; he couldn't allow his departure to be witnessed by a local. "I just use the pay phone to save money."

"Yeah . . . right." A soft jingle of loose change. "Money like this?"

Franc's blood froze. Just the sort of anachronistic mistake the CRC trained its researchers to avoid committing; he had left 1937 currency in a 1998 pay phone.

"I think I forgot that, yes," he said cautiously. "Thanks for bringing it back." He held out his hand. "If you'll let me have it, I'll . . ."

"Go home . . . sure. That's what you said." The stranger didn't come any closer. "Which gets back to . . . to my question. Who are you?"

"John Pannes." The reply came automatically, as if he was again being queried by the Gestapo agent at the Frankfurt hotel.

"Okay . . . and where are you from, Mr. Pannes?"

"Sir, I don't believe that's any of your business." Aware that the stranger's night vision was probably as good as his own, Franc fought an impulse to glance up at the sky. "Now, if you'll excuse me. . . ?"

"Don't think . . . I don't think you're telling the truth." The other man stood up straight, took a deep breath. "Not from around here, and don't think you're . . ."

He coughed hard, bringing up phlegm. "Not from this time," he said finally. "Are you, Mister Pannes?"

Franc felt blood rush from his face. Whoever this person was—although it was almost certain that he was with the soldiers camped nearby—he had surmised far too much. Whatever happened, he couldn't be allowed to witness the *Oberon*'s touchdown. Yet he was out of wind from running all the way up the hill, and Franc had darkness on his side. If he was quick enough . . .

"You could be right," Franc carefully replied. "Of course, it's a little difficult for me to answer, considering that I don't know who you are. . . ."

"Name's Murphy . . . Dr. Zack Murphy." The stranger seemed to relax a bit. "Astrophysicist. Office of Paranormal Sciences, United States Government."

A scientist. However, despite his extensive research of the twentieth century, Franc had never heard of the Office of Paranormal Sciences. A manifestation of this new world-line? No time to wonder about that now.

"Pleasure to meet you, Dr. Murphy," he said, taking a cautious step forward as he held out his hand. "I assume you've been looking for me?"

"Well, not really, but . . ." Murphy raised a hand, started toward him. "You still haven't told me . . ."

He hesitated just then, and for an instant Franc wondered if Murphy had a glimmer of his intentions. Then he audibly gasped, and even in the darkness Franc could tell that he was staring upward at something in the sky above.

"What the hell is...?"

That was the break he needed. Ducking his head, thrusting his arms and shoulders forward, Franc rushed Murphy.

He cleared the distance in a few quick steps. Distracted, the astrophysicist was caught entirely off-guard. Two fast, hard blows to the stomach, and he doubled over. Franc heard the breath whuff painfully from his lungs, then Murphy stumbled against him; his hands clawed at Franc's clothes, either in a feeble effort to fight back or simply to keep from falling.

Franc wasn't about to let him do either; he slammed a fist straight into Murphy's jaw. There was the angry sound of tearing fabric as the other man toppled backward, and he felt cold air against his chest. Then the scientist hit the asphalt and lay still.

Now the limbs of the surrounding trees were whipping back and forth as if caught in a supernatural gale. A loud hum surrounded him, then Franc was pinioned by a bright shaft of light. For an instant, he caught a glimpse of Murphy's face—he didn't seem much older than himself—then he turned to see a broad black oval hovering only a few meters above the ground.

Metz was in a hurry; he hadn't lowered the landing flanges, and he hadn't switched off the chameleon again. The light was from the open airlock hatch; Lea knelt in the hatch, extending her arm downward.

"Move it! We've got to get out of here!"

The wind whipped at his ripped coat; Murphy had managed to tear it when he went down. In a panic, he felt at his coat pockets; the glasses were still there. But he wasn't done here yet. . . .

"Hold on!" he shouted, then he stole a moment to kneel beside Murphy. Not completely unconscious, the scientist groaned softly as Franc rolled him over, but he was too groggy to offer any resistance. Franc pawed at his parka until he felt coins and heard the soft jingle of loose change. He reached into a pocket, retrieved the two dimes and one nickel that he had thoughtlessly left in the pay phone. Now the scientist had no tangible proof that he had ever encountered a chrononaut.

He started to stand up when he heard Murphy whisper something to him:

"Does . . . it . . . get any better?"

Franc knew what he meant.

"Depends what you do, my friend," he murmured. Then he leaped up and dashed toward the waiting timeship.

7:02 P.M.

Headlights were already racing up the hill when Metz took the *Oberon* back into the sky. Minutes later, the timeship pierced the dense cloud layer above the Tennessee countryside. This time, there were no hostile

aircraft in the sky, only the thinnest reaches of the stratosphere and, far above, the twinkling stars.

By then, Lea had taken Franc's glasses to the library pedestal, where she downloaded the chronological figures gathered by its nanochip into the AI. She and Franc hurried into the control room, and held their breath until Metz informed them that the parameters for a successful crosstime jaunt had been established. *Oberon* was still wounded, but it was healing rapidly; a few orbits, and it would be capable of opening a tunnel.

"But we can't go home." Metz's fingers nervously tapped the console beneath a flatscreen image of two parallel closed-time circles. "We'll get back to our year, no question about that. But we'll still be in a different continuum."

"So Chronos Station won't be there." Lea's voice was flat, nearly hopeless.

"Maybe it will. Maybe it won't." The pilot shrugged. "We'll have no idea until we get there. But we can't stay here, and don't even consider returning to 1937..."

"I know," Franc said. "We can't change what we've already done. Not without creating another paradox, at least."

"Sorry, but no." Metz shook his head. "What's done is done. We're stuck with the results, whatever they may be." He looked over his shoulder. "On the other hand, we could always go back to some point before 1937. Find a place to settle down in the past. A little farm in Kansas, circa 1890? A chateau in southern France around 1700? A modest vineyard in ancient Greece...?"

"Not tempting in the very least." Franc smiled. "It's a new universe, to be sure, but I don't think it'll be all that different." His smile became a broad grin. "In fact, we may find it surprisingly similar."

Metz's face was unapologetically skeptical, but Lea stared at him. "What makes you think that?"

Franc absently played with the torn lining of his coat. "Only a hunch."

Friday, January 16, 1998: 7:09 P.M.

"And you didn't see the guy who hit you?"

"Not clearly, no." Seated on the front bumper of the Hummer, Murphy leaned back against the grill. "I mean, it's pretty dark..."

"I got that, but I still don't understand why he'd just attack you." Illuminated by the headlights, Ogilvy crouched on the road before him. "Neither do I understand what you were doing all the way up here. The sergeant at the checkpoint said you had just gone to the store for a soda. That's a quarter mile down the road from here."

Murphy gently touched the asphalt scrape on his forehead. It wasn't very sore, but the motion helped hide his face. "Only wanted to stretch

my legs a bit more before heading back to camp, that's all. I hope I didn't get your man in any trouble."

"He'll live." Ogilvy glanced over his shoulder at the two soldiers searching the roadside with flashlights. "Let's try it again. You walk all the way up here, just to stretch your legs, and when we find you, you're beat up and lying here in the road. You say it's because some total stranger stepped out of the woods and asked you for some spare change, and when you told him you didn't have any, he attacked you. Then he vanishes, just like that. Have I got everything?"

"I don't have an explanation, either." Murphy looked the colonel straight in the eye. "Maybe he was just . . . I dunno. Some crazy hitchhiker. Things happen like that."

"Right." The colonel slowly nodded. "Why do I get the feeling you're not telling me the truth?"

"That's all there is. Honest."

Ogilvy sighed as he stood up. "Well, whatever happened up here, it made you miss all the excitement. The yew-foh vanished. We think it lifted off."

"Oh, shit! Really?" It was all Murphy could do to feign astonishment. "You mean it's gone?"

"Happened about ten, fifteen minutes ago. First, it went invisible again, right under the eyes of the guys we left on the island. We heard a loud hum, then all the lights and electronic equipment went dead. Water shot up into the air where the saucer had been resting, and then . . . well, it was gone."

"And you didn't see anything?"

"Just a black shape taking off. It was gone before we could track it." Ogilvy tucked his hands in the pockets of his parka. "That's when we discovered you were AWOL. It'll be sweet bringing you back. When she found out you were missing, Ms. Luna claimed she received a psychic impression that you'd been taken by her aliens."

Murphy laughed out loud, but not for the reasons the colonel probably thought he did. For once, Meredith Cynthia Luna had come close to making the right guess. "I'm sure she's been wrong before."

"Yeah, well . . ." Ogilvy looked around again. "Go on, get in the vehicle. It's warmer there. I'm going to give my guys a few more minutes to find your mysterious friend, then we'll go back and start breaking down camp. I don't imagine we'll find anything else, do you?"

"No, I doubt it." Wincing from the bruises on his stomach, Murphy stood up from the bumper. "We might check the island again, just to be safe, but you're probably right."

He let Ogilvy open the Hummer's passenger door, and waited in the shotgun seat until the colonel walked away to see whether the soldiers had discovered anything. When he was finally alone, he pulled a crumpled sheet of paper out of his pocket.

It had come from the stranger's inside coat pocket, in that half-instant when Murphy had grabbed at him during their fight and torn it. Murphy had only the vaguest recollection of the other man whispering something as he kneeled over him; the two dimes and the nickel were missing when he regained consciousness, but this single sheet of paper was still clenched in his fist, along with a shred of dark fabric.

Murphy gently uncrumpled the paper and studied it under the dim glow of the dashboard. At the top of the page was a stylized dirigible flanked by olive branches; a scroll beneath the airship declared it to be the LZ-129 *Hindenberg*.

Below the picture of the airship was a list of names: a passenger manifest. Halfway down the list, two names caught his eye: Mr. and Mrs. John and Emma Pannes, of Manhasset, Long Island.

Murphy looked up, saw the colonel walking back to the vehicle, followed by the two soldiers. He had just tucked the paper into an inner pocket when Ogilvy opened the right rear passenger door.

"We're not going to find anything," Ogilvy muttered as he settled into the back seat. "No need to rush, though. We've got until morning before we have to be out of here."

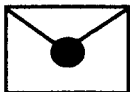
"Yeah. No need to hurry." Murphy turned his head to gaze out the window. The clouds were beginning to dissipate; for the first time tonight, he could make out a few stars. "Fools rush in . . ."

One of the Rangers opened the driver's door to climb behind the wheel. "Pardon me, sir?" the soldier asked. "Did you say something?"

"Hmm? Oh, nothing." Murphy smiled at his half-reflection in the window. "Just thinking." ●

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Long-time regular readers of this column will know that I do not often deal with fantasy herein, or at least fantasy of the ordinary genre variety. First as a reader, then as a writer, and finally as a critic, my literary interest in what is now published under the SF logo has always been primarily in *science fiction*.

The publication of fantasy under the SF logo began as a market ploy, not a literary decision. Prior to the commercial success of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, very little fantasy was published in the United States at all, and most of that well-established literary

classics, not originals.

But Ballantine Books, flush with the success of its authorized paperback edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, understandably wanted more. So they commissioned Lin Carter to put together a paperback fantasy reprint series. Since Ballantine was dominantly a science fiction publisher, and since at that time no one had the foggiest idea how to package and market fantasy in paperback, they lumped it in with their science fiction more or less by default.

And it worked.

When the reprints proved commercially viable, Ballantine decided to commission original fantasy novels, and since fantasy had already become established as a branch of their SF program, and since they were well-connected with the SF writing community, and since not many other writers out there were writing this stuff anyway, they naturally turned to science fiction writers.

And that is how it all began. That is how, decades later, medieval fantasies, sword-and-sorcery, horror, and so forth, have long since come to be staples of "SF" publishing programs, indeed to dominate them.

What can I tell you, it ain't my

planet, literarily speaking. Just because packagers have long since chosen to market this stuff as "SF" doesn't mean it has much in literary, esthetic, or philosophical common with science fiction, or even, until rather recently, with the more broadly defined speculative fiction which came into flower in the New Wave era.

Fantasy (and here I am speaking about the established conventional genre variety) deals with the forthrightly impossible by definition, is generally speaking retrospective, set in a kind of transmogrified past, and relies, more often than not, on the evocation of established cultural imagery—vampires, werewolves, the Arthurian cycle, sorcerers, dragons, elves, and so forth.

Science fiction (and here I am speaking of most science fiction, conventional genre variety or not) must deal with the speculatively possible by definition, is generally speaking future-oriented, and relies most of the time on its own *self-created* imagery that only later passes into the general cultural vocabulary or even into concrete existence—spaceships, robots, clones, extraterrestrial aliens, cyberspace, virtual reality, and so forth.

So literarily speaking, speculative fiction and fantasy are worlds apart, and a predilection for one does not necessarily imply a predilection for the other, and indeed may preclude it.

However. . . .

However, at least since the 1950s, and probably earlier, there has always been a certain amount

of fiction that has blurred the line. Where does one place Jack Vance, for example, whose tales set on other planets have the same feel as his straightforward fantasies like *The Dying Earth* or *Cugel The Clever*, and whose scientific verisimilitude is hardly to be taken seriously or meant to be by the author? Or works by Fritz Leiber in a similar vein?

And then there is Harlan Ellison, if not the first "modern fantasist," then certainly the key figure in the evolution of "modern fantasy" out of . . . out of . . . well, to be blunt about it, potted science fiction.

Ellison began his career writing every conceivable genre of story for any sort of magazine that would publish them, and literarily speaking soon began to develop in two different and seemingly contradictory directions.

There was Harlan Ellison, the contemporary realist; gritty, streetwise, idealistically cynical, the last stand, one might almost say, of the angry proletarian fiction of the 1930s, who later also developed into a sophisticated chronicler of Hollywood and show business in much the same vein.

And there was Harlan Ellison, the science fiction writer; whose grasp of science and technology was at best shaky, and whose concern for which was hardly central to the work he published in the SF magazines, and who has spent decades arguing in public that he is *not* a science fiction writer when writing in this vein, with mixed results.

In literary terms, it must be said

that Ellison is right. Most of his fiction set off planet and/or in the future has about as much scientific verisimilitude as that of Vance, to be charitable about it. Early on, perhaps, this might have been a matter of lack of knowledge or skill, but as Ellison matured as a writer, it became obvious, perhaps also to him, that he really didn't give a damn about scientific accuracy or technological credibility.

Which is to say that Ellison's "SF" was really fantasy utilizing science fictional imagery. In this he was hardly alone. Many successful science fiction writers have been, are, and probably always will be, no more technologically au courant or scientifically literate than Harlan Ellison, or even care to be.

But Ellison was also writing realistic contemporary fiction, stories about gangs, about Hollywood, about people involved in all sorts of ordinary and extraordinary real-life work situations.

And as his interest in conventional science fiction tropes waned, the speculative thrust that had drawn him to it in the first place, liberated from any need to simulate technological credibility, shorn of all scientific pretensions, began to leak into and then to dominate his contemporary realistic fiction, transforming it into something rather new under the sun.

Ellison began to write stories set in realistically rendered contemporary settings featuring realistically rendered modern characters into which forthright fantasy elements

intruded without apology or more than the briefest occasional pass at explanation.

Voilà, Modern Fantasy.

Not merely fantasy written by modern writers, but fantasy in relentlessly modern settings with recognizably modern casts of characters, and written, at least in Ellison's case, using the full palette of modern literary technique.

And decades later, we can begin to see that out of this beginning have evolved literary works as diverse as the oeuvres of Stephen King and Clive Barker and James Morrow and even to some extent Anne Rice, down to postmodern fantasists as diverse as Jonathan Carroll, Todd Grimson, and Paul Witcover.

So why, you may well ask, am I only getting around to dealing with this phenomenon now?

Well, the easy answer is that postmodern fantasy is what I've found myself mostly reading lately, rather than forthright science fiction.

Why is a more difficult question.

Perhaps because it's where much of the literary action in "SF" seems to be of late. What do I mean by literary action? The cutting edge, the place where evolution is taking place.

In the 1930s and 1940s, it was John W. Campbell's *Astounding*, where pulp adventure fiction was being transformed into hard SF. In the 1950s, it was *Galaxy*, where science fiction was assimilating the soft sciences of psychology and sociology, and *The Magazine of*

Fantasy & Science Fiction, where for the first time prose was being held to general literary standards. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, it was *New Worlds* and the Ace Specials and Avon Books, where the New Wave was giving "speculative fiction" a countercultural lysergic edge, a rock and roll rhythm, a taste for experimental prose and form. In the 1980s, it was Cyberpunk, with its synthesis of technophilia with an outlaw sensibility along the gleaming virtual interface of the bits and the bytes. In the 1990s . . .

Uh . . .

Many good science fiction novels have been published in the 1990s, indeed probably more than in any previous decade. But how many great ones? Or even flawed groundbreakers? Books that have opened new possibilities, have opened the eyes of writers and readers to new directions, stirred up the torpid waters, changed things forever, contributed to the onward literary evolution of science fiction?

As Dwight Eisenhower said when asked to name a significant contribution of his vice president, Richard Nixon, to serious policy debate: "Give me a week and I'll think of one."

The paradox is that despite the fact that more promising writers have entered the field than in any other decade and more worthy early novels have been written, in retrospect it can be seen that, as the 1990s begin to wind down, this has been a period of literary stagnation for science fiction.

Or to be crueler about it, devolution.

In previous literary epochs, the pressures on science fiction writers were evolutionary. Campbell demanded greater scientific accuracy and extrapolative originality. H.L. Gold demanded deeper characterization. Anthony Boucher demanded better writing. Michael Moorcock demanded a revolutionary esprit. The cyberpunks demanded an acceptance of the synergy between technology and that outlaw spirit, between the nerd and the rocker, and an immersion in the contemporary popcult zeitgeist.

Evolutionary pressure.

In the past half decade or so, however, science fiction publishing has been successfully invaded by aliens from the Planet Schlock.

Namely by a profusion of *Star Trek* novels, *Star Wars* novels, *X-Files* novels, novelizations of comics, franchise universe series, all of which have one thing in common—they are *product*.

They are produced and written to sell. They exist for commercial and not literary reasons. They sell because they are tied in to other media products with far greater audiences than those for books, because they are familiar, not because they astonish.

They are also more often than not work for hire, or at best pay diminished royalty rates to the actual writers, and therefore not only sell more copies due to the media tie-ins, but are more profitable in unit sales terms. And therefore tend to receive the lion's share of

marketing push. And to dominate SF publishing.

Devolutionary pressure.

In such an environment, writers are pressured into thinking of themselves as producers of product by the necessities of economic survival, rather than being pressured by peers and editors of passion to push the edge of the literary envelope ever on.

Yet somehow, modern, or, if you will, postmodern fantasy—as opposed to the swords-and-magic-and-dragons stuff—seems much less susceptible to this marketing pressure to extend everything that sells into a series, whether on one's own, or farmed out to galley slaves.

Why?

Because the people writing it are more idealistic?

I think not. I think it's something in the very literary nature of the mode itself.

Take *Stainless*, an impressive first novel by Todd Grimson. This is a vampire novel set in contemporary Los Angeles, and also a kind of love story. The main characters are Justine, a vampire of some several hundred years experience, Keith, her willing human assistant and lover, and David, an evil vampire of her past casual making.

Justine is a "good" vampire—well, sort of; she sips blood carefully, leaving more of her victims than not alive and human with holes in their memories, except when she, uh, goes over the top, and then she usually kills them instead of making more of her kind.

She feels guilt. She feels shame. She feels remorse. She feels self-disgust. In the end, she proves capable of learning to love.

David, on the other hand, is a monster; not merely a vampire but a *moral* monster, a slimy, rather stupid, vicious, sadistic creep.

Well, you can see where the set-up must lead, plotwise, and indeed it does.

You can also see how such a modern vampire novel could easily enough be expanded into an endless novel series in the manner of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's vampire Saint-Germaine or Ann Rice's Lestat or at least S.P. Somtow's Timmy Valentine trilogy, as Justine and her faithful Keith battle David and his tribe of surfer nazi vampires across the contemporary American landscape or even beyond into more exotic foreign locales.

But *Stainless* is a *postmodern* vampire novel. It owes more to, say, Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* than Rice or Yarbro, or for that matter Stoker. *Stainless*, at least for me, unlike *modern* vampire novels, is genuinely emotionally disturbing. As in splatterpunk, awful, disgusting, horrible, morally repugnant things happen quite regularly. But more, Grimson will carefully build up sympathetic minor viewpoint characters and then have them butchered quite casually, sometimes even off-stage. Later, he'll have them come back as vampires and commit ghastly atrocities themselves.

Even the lovers, Keith and Jus-

tine, generally portrayed as sympathetic characters with whom we identify, commit murders with a certain easy casualness.

And yet, while Grimson writes the whole thing in an almost deadpan manner, glissing along the moral surface of this Los Angeles demimonde almost like William Gibson surfing the pop cult virtual interface, powerful emotions *are* evoked here, occasionally the characters *do* feel them, and the love story of Keith and Justine, the Bonnie and Clyde of the bloodsucking set, ends with a certain pathos, a romantic apotheosis, that is for sure a satisfying and quite permanent closure.

Stainless is a postmodern novel in that the author seems to stand at a certain moral distance from the events and personages he is describing, yet at the same time, indeed perhaps thereby, shoves the whole thing emotionally right in your face.

It's hard to imagine any reader not reacting emotionally to this book, in part because of the ghastly events, but more because of the moral confusion in conventional terms of a fictional world without justice, without the writer telling you what you're supposed to feel, as characters you care for are suddenly snuffed, or turned into monsters, as even the identification figures commit not only physical but moral atrocities from time to time, yet still somehow remain sympathetic.

Aside from the plot resolution, which I will not be so crass as to re-

veal; this evocation of emotional and moral confusion on the part of the reader at the core of the book is what makes something like *Stainless* probably impossible to turn into a commercially successful novel series.

For the core commercial appeal of any novel series is familiarity, easy identification with the continuing viewpoint characters, an emotional satisfaction at being back in an ongoing alternate universe, the assurance that the running characters will survive; certainly not emotional discomfort, moral confusion, and genuinely felt deaths, let alone this species of final closure.

And sure enough, while Grimson's second novel, *Brand New Cherry Flavor*, is set to a large extent in a similar Los Angeles milieu, none of the characters from *Stainless* make even cameo appearances, nor are there vampires to be found. Furthermore, it represents an admirable evolution of Grimson as a writer, if along the same rather disturbing vector.

Here the main viewpoint character is Lisa Nova, avant-garde filmmaker wannabe, sometime porn starlet, sometime bimchette, your postmodern Andy Warhol Chelsea Girl transported through time and space to Southern California.

Screwed in several senses of the word by a Hollywood schlockmeister producer, Lisa, seeking vengeance, enlists the aid of a kind of biker brujo who calls himself Boro and claims to have gained his powers and immortality from a white jaguar goddess who was his lover,

or maybe from just a lot of bad drugs. Inevitably, Lisa gets a lot more than what she was bargaining for, though what she was bargaining for was bad enough.

The story moves between this trash mystical Los Angeles milieu and Brazil—Rio, where Lisa flees from the increasingly sanguinary and gross vengeance Boro takes on the producer and his family and the increasingly unpleasant prices he extracts from her, and her mad pharmacological doctor father's jungle lab, where her father has discovered a drug that mostly turns people comatose or causes them to kill themselves, but which, when ingested by Lisa, transports her into a strange and bloody alternate reality, from which she somehow manages to emerge with a fully finished film shot entirely in her own head and magically transferable to celluloid.

Once again, we have minor viewpoint characters built up sympathetically, only to be snuffed. Once again, only in a way more so, we have a "heroine" with whom we identify, with whom we empathize, for whom we root, who nevertheless, in the final analysis, commits a series of selfishly motivated morally repugnant acts and in this case more or less comes up roses. Morally and thematically speaking, this is light-years away from the righteously angry modern fantasy pioneered by Harlan Ellison, and that is one thing that makes it postmodern.

And in a peculiar way, Grimson owes a literary debt not only to

Brett Easton Ellis but to the Tom Wolfe who invented the "New Journalism" back in the 1960s by applying the full panoply of novelistic form and prose to reportage.

Brand New Cherry Flavor (a title, by the way, which seems to have nothing to do with anything in the book, just as *Stainless* also seems to have been generated by a random title selection program) is a kind of inverse New Journalism, in which Grimson assumes the journalist's morally neutral professional stance, from which vantage to write a powerful and emotionally disturbing novel about what is basically a morally fucked-up heroine.

Just the facts, ma'am, in the immortal words of Sgt. Joe Friday, the point perhaps being that in this kind of postmodern fantasy, amusingly written, erudite, colorful reportage of the grotesque and disturbing events and personages of the story are more than enough to create an emotionally, psychologically, morally, and philosophically disturbing novel.

Which, perhaps, is the essence of what makes postmodern fantasy postmodern. And why it seems unlikely that writers like Grimson can or will degenerate into producers of novel series. And why it is much easier for current writers of science fiction to devolve in this direction. And why, of late, it seems that the literary action here has become more interesting than most of what is going on in pur sang science fiction.

It would seem that postmodern fantasy, with its disjunction be-

tween horrors and moral outrages and the writers' deliberate eschewing of the providing of philosophical or moral guidelines, is crafted to evoke, stir, and disturb the reader on a moral and emotional level almost by definition.

Novel series, with their inherent reliance on identification with the continuing protagonist and the overall effect from book to book of familiarity and reassurance, cannot do this for very many episodes and succeed, either esthetically or commercially. It's hard to imagine a novel series built around characters like Justine, Keith, and Lisa Nova, or written from Grimson's peculiarly postmodern stance.

Science fiction, on the other hand, is lately seldom centered on roiling such disturbing waters in the psyches of the readers. More often than not, it deals with positing a vital scientific, technological, political, cultural, or personal problem (ideally all of the above at once) and following the characters as they confront it, usually with fairly clear self-knowledge and moral centers, or at least with the awareness that such things exist and must be pursued.

When recent science fiction does assume a postmodern stance of reportorial moral neutrality, it is usually in the manner of William Gibson, describing the surface of tales that themselves seem to have no particular emotional or moral import, rather than summoning up moral monsters from the vasty deeps for the readers to ponder without a manual.

It's certainly not that science fiction cannot or never has been emotionally disturbing and exploratory, and even in this postmodern manner. One need only mention the oeuvres of Theodore Sturgeon, Philip K. Dick, William Burroughs, and J.G. Ballard, for quick examples, to dispel that notion immediately. And indeed one could argue that Tom Godwin's famous classic "The Cold Equations" is *the* exemplar of the melding of hard science fiction with the postmodern stance, and written way back when.

But it seems to me that not much science fiction like this has been written lately. Perhaps this is in large part because the commercial pressures to think series mitigate against exploring this vector, precisely because following this vector mitigates against the production of novel series. And it certainly would make it impossible to sharecrop a novel in a series, which is where the money presently is, the Big Bucks on the high end, and the writer's survival along the grim reality of the bottom line.

And what can I tell you—I may in general prefer science fiction to fantasy, but I much prefer fiction that gets to me on an emotional, moral, and spiritual level, than fiction that doesn't. And of late, I've been finding a lot more of that in postmodern fantasy than in science fiction.

On the other hand, not only are such sharp genre definitions invidious, but some of the most interesting action is along the interface be-

tween genres, or better yet in fiction that ignores or even explores those very boundaries. And particularly so when the literary interface is that between science fiction and fantasy, which, in the real world, whatever that is, is the interface between the possible and the impossible, between science and magic, between phenomenological data and mystical experience.

And further, as if to rub our noses in the fact that consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds and not a property of our universe literary or otherwise, here we have three novels—*City on Fire* by Walter Jon Williams, *Waking Beauty* by Paul Witcover, and *Blameless in Abaddon* by James Morrow, all of which blur and explore the interface between science fiction and fantasy. Two of these are forthrightly second books in novel series and one may or may not be the first in one, and two of them are quite as morally and emotionally disturbing as Todd Grimson's post-modern fantasies.

City on Fire is the sequel to Williams's *Metropolitan* and would seem to be clearly revealed at the (non)end to be a prequel to something else. Ordinarily I don't like novel series, and like still less novel series in which the author's intent is nowhere announced in the text or packaging of book one, and I don't exactly find it a plus here either.

I sniffed something like this at the end of *Metropolitan*, where Aiah, the heroine, and Constantine, her sometime lover and full-time political machinator, have

won the revolution in the city of Caraqui, and are about to go there and take over. For while winning the revolution is certainly a satisfactory story closure for any novel and would hardly seem to demand a sequel on that level, it was the fictional world that Williams created in *Metropolitan* that grabbed me, and the central mysteries thereof were left unresolved.

In *Metropolitan*, Williams gave us an Earth englobed by some kind of impenetrable barrier called the Shield, giving the planet a seamless silvery sky beyond which are the Ascended, whoever and whatever they may be. Here we have a baroquely complex world-city covering the surface of the Earth, with a technology like something out of Jules Verne, or, better, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, with the addition of plasm, the geomantic force that Williams and his characters call magic and which indeed has powers we would consider magical, but which operates much like electricity, down to the circuits, switches, meters, and whopping bills.

Who are the Ascended who created the Shield? Why did they do it? What is it? What lies beyond? Is plasm magic or technology?

While *Metropolitan* certainly did come to a satisfying plot closure, all of this was left hanging, which is to say there were no answers to the puzzles and there was no thematic resolution. So, even knowing, that, yes, it was a sequel, I could not avoid reading *City on Fire* to see if they could be found

therein, knowing, alas, that since this was book two, and three is the minimum magic number, I was not too likely to find total satisfaction.

Nor did I.

City on Fire is based on a rather droll and seldom-used premise. Having staged a coup and taken over a city by force of arms, next?

What next is you have to set up a government to administer the mess you have made. And secure the funds to do it. And deal with the coalition politics involved in so doing. And since *you* have taken over the city via an armed coup backed by mercenaries from the previous elite who did likewise to *their* predecessors, you'd have to be hopelessly naïve or politically brain-dead not to suppose that sooner or later other power-groupings, perhaps even within your own coalition, are going to try to do the same to you. And if you are Constantine, with pretensions to some vague universalist ideology called the "New City," the neighboring states are going to be nervous and restless, especially when, instead of demobilizing your mercenary army, you bring in more troops.

So *City on Fire* is mostly a political novel that begins with the problems of forming a government and administering a conquered city, proceeds to setting up the electoral process thereof, to its uneasy relationship with its neighbors, to a series of political crises and coups that degenerate into all-out prolonged urban warfare and that end with the triumph of Aiah and her patron Constantine.

It's as if the late Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago found himself transported to the Venice of the Borgias to ward-heel, knock heads together, and restore rough order, and step by step found the situation transforming itself into Sarajevo or 1980s Beirut.

On this level the story works quite well, and once again Williams brings his plot-line to a satisfying closure, and indeed up to a point a thematic and personal one as well, as Aiah's power relationship with Constantine undergoes something of a reversal even as their personal relationship sours, and for much the same reasons. Meanwhile, Williams gives us a mordant lesson in the ironies of political idealism, charisma, and political cynicism.

But once again, Williams leaves the central mysteries of his world unresolved.

Only more so.

One of the central sociopolitical themes here is that the stagnant society of the Earth is the result of a closed world-city encapsulated in the bubble of the Shield like an overcrowded terrarium, and the main thrust of Constantine's New City movement is an inchoate passion to burst these bonds.

And Aiah and the reader are herein given the merest glimpse into what lies beyond the Shield, described but briefly and in symbolic astrological terms, so that she doesn't at all understand what she has seen or what reality level to take it on, and neither do we. Further, the winning play of the war

involves the powers of a mystic cult, which may involve a new form of magic that Williams has not introduced before, or some kind of technology, or . . .

Or something that is neither and/or both?

Which, alas, and not without annoyance, is going to make me read the next book of the series in hope of finding out, just as the craft and cunning of the author intended.

Because it just may be that Walter Jon Williams is indeed attempting here some kind of ultimate grand synthesis between fantasy and science fiction, between magic and technology, between the political and the mystical, and this is a literary high-wire act worth watching to the end, hoping that he will succeed, but interesting in the attempt even if he ends up falling on his face.

Waking Beauty, an extraordinarily powerful and mature first novel by Paul Witcover, seems at least at first to be pure fantasy, set as it is in a world that seems to be no place and nowhen in particular. There's magic, or at least there seems to be, and while the characters are human, however magically altered some of them may be, serpents have wings, fireflies are something else, and the place names and geographical descriptions at least at first seem to have little reference to Earth or for the most part even any recognizable terrestrial language.

Wherever we are, it is under the iron rule of the Hierarchate, ruled by a kind of uneasy and shifting

power balance between the Sovereign and the Ecclesiarch, and a more thoroughly unpleasant theocratic tyranny would be difficult to imagine and even more difficult to contemplate on a full stomach.

The place of women in the Hierarchate makes Saudi Arabia seem like a paradise designed for militant feminists. Marriage herein is called "patrimony," not "matrimony," and women's strict subservience to men is prescribed and enforced by a millennial religion that seems to combine the worst aspects of Christian fundamentalism, theocratic fascism, and sado-masochism. Young men are advised that women like their sex brutal, harsh, and short, or if they don't, they damn well better.

Not that the Hierarchate is Porker Paradise either. At roughly bar mitzvah age, a ritual tracheotomy is performed on boys, and a fancy plug inserted in the throat hole as a sign of manhood. Each night thereafter for the rest of their lives they are strapped to their beds, their nostrils are stuffed up, a breathing tube is inserted into their throat holes, and they must be watched over by their women—wives or mothers or daughters—until dawn.

Because each night comes an aphrodisiac perfume called Beauty detectable only by males who have passed through puberty. It emanates from the mysterious Herwood, wherein dwell the evil Furies and their deity Maw, banished there by Ixion Diospyros and his Saints ages ago at the founding of

the Hierarchate. Men who struggle free of their bonds are lured there to their doom, never to return.

Women whose lapses allow this to happen are turned over to the "panderman," and transformed into Cats, somatically and psychically altered perfect prostitutes.

There is more, much more than can be gone into here. Witcover creates an incredibly complex and detailed religion, replete with mythos, legends, back story, all of it extremely nasty indeed; rigidly hierarchical, incredibly phallogocratic, sexually perverted, sadistic, and powerfully described in explicit gory detail.

Another reason it's called the Hierarchate is that wherever and whenever it is, this world seems to consist of a few cities, each one more desirable than the next, beginning at the bottom with loathsome Arpagee, and reaching the pinnacle of the Crystal City Quoz, wherein dwell the Sovereign and the Ecclesiarch. Families strive to climb this slow ladder generation by generation; if they screw up, they are thrown back.

The story starts small in the boonies and then cuts to Quoz for a bewilderingly complex political power struggle between the Ecclesiarch and the Sovereign, and yes, the inevitable rebels against this hideous system who reveal the Word according to Ixion Diospyros to be an evil lie. . . .

But enough potted plot summary, which perhaps makes *Waking Beauty* seem too much like the old *Eternal Fantasy Struggle Between*

Good and Evil. In reality, though, other things are going on here.

For one thing, while Evil everywhere abounds, Good is hard to find. For instance, the rebels' take on life, the universe, and everything, turns out to be just as loathsome as that of the Hierarchate.

And for another, along about the middle of the book, the distant cognates between place and person names therein and those of our own time begin to accumulate, as do the tenuously reverberating connections with our contemporary religions. Then, too, as we begin to learn that the "vizards" of the fictional time of the novel are playing with magics created by their millennial distant predecessors, that the magical objects and devices are things they can use but not duplicate, the notion begins to steal upon us that maybe this is not magic but degenerate high technology, that maybe we are in a far future in which reality itself has somehow mutated, that maybe this is not fantasy but science fiction.

Then, too, the Sovereign is a heavy metheglin junkie, and he ain't the only one. The whole Hierarchate runs on metheglin, economically, politically, and psychically, the way Colombia runs on cocaine or Burma on heroin, only much, much worse.

Metheglin itself confers near-immortality and psychic powers in massive doses, which hardly anyone but the Sovereign can afford. In lesser doses, it gets you high, heals the sick, all but raises the dead, but not, surprisingly, is a

very bad jones that in the end reduces you to slime Jell-O.

As for the source of this drug, it's one of the major revelations of the novel. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, but you would be well-advised to have a barf bag at hand when Witcover finally does.

Further, the sex here is far more explicit than in your usual fantasy or science fiction novel. A contemporary vocabulary is used by both the author and his characters to speak of it, and some of it is *extremely* perverted, not so much in physical terms (though there is that) but in psychological terms, of which the people in this fictional world seem to have a modern sophisticated awareness.

In other words, while the setting and the magics make this seem like a fantasy world, Witcover builds up hints that it may be a science fictional far future. Be that as it may, the cunningly psychosexual design of the several versions of the fictional religion and the author's meditations thereon inform *Waking Beauty* with a relentlessly modern consciousness.

A postmodern consciousness, in fact, for Witcover gives the novel a mystical apotheosis that satisfies on a structural and characterological level without either resolving all of the central mysteries or delivering an auctorial moral judgment.

It certainly *could* be a set up for a sequel.

I certainly hope it isn't.

James Morrow's *Blameless in Abaddon* is billed by the publisher

as a sequel to his *Towing Jehovah*, and I suppose it is. You could throw in *Only Begotten Daughter* and call it a trilogy. And add his collection *Bible Stories for Adults* if you want to get a tetralogy out of it. And I suspect there will be more to come. And in this case I don't mind.

It is, after all, a rather large subject that Morrow has chosen, or perhaps that has chosen him.

James Morrow, it seems, has gotten himself into a ongoing moral argument with God.

Specifically with the Biblical version, whose huge dead body is the McGuffin of *Towing Jehovah*, whose Only Begotten Son undergoes a sex change in *Only Begotten Daughter*, and whose Bible itself Morrow rewrites for adults, to, in the words of William Burroughs, show us the meal on the end of the fork.

In *Blameless in Abaddon*, Morrow takes on *The Book of Job*, his Job being Martin Candle, a virtuous judge in Abaddon, PA, on whom the evils of the world have been unjustly inflicted, the capper being a case of terminal cancer. God, it turns out, is not quite dead, but merely in a coma, and his giant corpus has become the main attraction in the Celestial City theme park in Orlando, where tourists are taken for a ride through his psyche in the manner of Pirates of the Caribbean.

Martin, however, unlike the original Job, is a lawyer and an American one to boot, and hauls Jehovah before the World Court on charges of crimes against humani-

ty. And the trial of God on these charges is the center of the novel.

Fantasy? Science fiction? Something else?

Probably something else. Morrow has been at this for a while now. He takes the Bible at its Word, more or less, phenomenologically speaking, but then subjects its Deity, personages, and events, not only to transportation into our contemporary world, but to a kind of weird hard SF approach—how do you tow the dead body of God? how do you keep it from rotting? what venue could you prosecute Jehovah in? how to raise the funds to do it?—which the shade of John W. Campbell, Jr., could hardly find objectionable.

This, of course, is inherently funny, and Morrow's skill at inventing schtick and comic writing makes it more so. And a good thing for him too, for Morrow is standing fundamentalism on its pointed head in a manner that would otherwise be boiling blood throughout the Bible Belt and causing many a good old boy to reach for his shotgun.

Essentially what he is doing is taking the Bible not *literally*, as a Christian fundamentalist would, but *literarily*, as a Campbellian hard SF writer would, as a hypothesized skein of fictional events to be dropped into our contemporary world and subjected to analysis by contemporary consciousness.

That's the source of the humor.

Hah. Hah.

Well, okay, James Morrow is a fine comic writer, and yes, it all is funny, sometimes screamingly so.

But beneath the laughs there is something much deeper and darker.

Morrow is subjecting the God and events of the Bible to contemporary *moral* analysis. Having his Job put God on trial for crimes against humanity, for the existence of Evil in a universe of which it is claimed He is the omnipotent and omniscient creator, is, after all, rather serious stuff.

Morrow, righteous American that he is, does seem to be trying to give the Old Boy a fair trial, but at least for my money, the various arguments of the defense seem to smack of the tactics of O.J. Simpson's legal team, legal eagles all, against whom the evidence was overwhelmingly stacked, and who therefore had to resort to smoke, mirrors, points of order, and sophistry.

I mean, after all, how *does* an omnipotent and omniscient God cop a plea on *The Book of Job*, wherein He dumps disaster on the head of an exemplar of virtue in order to win a bet with the Devil? On the Holocaust, or the Gulag, or the Spanish Inquisition? On cancer and AIDS and the Ebola virus?

Postmodern fantasy? Neo-Campbellian science fiction? Theological parables in clown's clothing?

None and/or all of the above. If nothing else, Morrow's work is an object lesson in the futility of genre categorization. And much, much more.

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Join WorldCon(vention) 1998 now, before rates go up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 13107B Autumn Wood Way, Fairfax VA 22033. The hot line is (703) 449-1276. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons) leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 1997

5-7—**CopperCon**. For info, write: Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. Or phone: (602) 973-2054 (10AM to 10PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Phoenix AZ (if city omitted, same as in address) at a hotel to be announced. Guests will include: none announced so far. Low-key relax-a-con. Unwind after the WorldCon in San Antonio.

5-7—**ShoreCon**. (908) 262-9249. Hilton, Cherry Hill NJ. Lawrence Watt-Evans. Some events held on Thursday.

12-14—**MosCon**. (509) 332-2910. University Inn Best Western, Moscow ID. Niven, Sternbach, Poul Anderson.

26-28—**NotJustAnotherCon**, c/o SCUM, RSO 16, UMass, Amherst MA 01003. (413) 545-1924. Richard Pini.

26-28—**ConGenial**, Box 542911, Chicago IL 60654. (800) 228-9290 (hotel). Marriott, Racine WI. Rittenhouse, Ready.

26-28—**ConCept**, Box 405, Stn. H, Montreal PQ H3G 2L1. (514) 487-0587. Lois McMaster Bujold, Wayne Barlowe.

26-28—**Arcana**, Box 8036, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 484-2575. Neil Gaiman. Horror emphasis.

OCTOBER 1997

2-5—**Death Equinox**, Box 581, Denver CO 80201. (303) 987-2000 (hotel). Sheraton, Lakewood CO. Shirley, Bryant.

3-5—**Archon**, Box 8387, Chesterfield MO 63132. (314) 326-3026. Holiday Inn, Collinsville IL. Bujold, G. Martin.

3-5—**ConText**, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 878-6824. Harley Hotel. David Brin, Gene Wolfe, C. Ready.

10-12—**FarPoint**, 6099 Hunt Club Rd., Elkridge MD 21227. (410) 579-1257. Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Star Trek.

10-12—**Icon**, Box 525, Iowa City IA 52244. (319) 338-7375. Best Western Westfield Inn, Coralville IA. J. Ford.

10-12—**NonCon**, 325 Leaside Ave. S., Lethbridge AB T1J 4G8. (403) 380-4462. Sandman Hotel. S. & J. Robinson.

10-12—**OurCon**, 319 85th St. N., Birmingham AL 35206. No more news on this one at press time.

10-12—**Rising Star**, 545 Howard Dr., Salem VA 24153. (540) 389-9400. Hal Clement, Richard Pich, Deanna Lund.

11-12—**ConClave**, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (517) 694-8123 (hotel). Holiday Inn, Lansing MI. P. Anderson.

17-19—**ConStellation**, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. (205) 883-4493. Airport Sheraton. J. Chaiker, Randy Cleary.

17-19—**AlbaCon**, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. (518) 456-5242. Ramada Inn, Schenectady NY. M. Scott, W. Brown.

17-19—**InCon**, Box 9112, Spokane WA 99209. (509) 487-5447. Spokane Valley Red Lion. B. Hamby, L. Newcomer.

17-19—**ConFurence East**, 11037 Henning Dr., Chardon OH 44024. (216) 285-2207. Cleveland OH. For Furry fans.

AUGUST 1998

5-9—**BucCONeer**, Box 314, Annapolis Junction MD 20701. Inner Harbor, Baltimore MD. WorldCon. \$110 in Sept.

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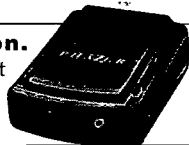
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